



**SNAKE-BITE  
DOCTOR** AND OTHER  
CHILDREN'S STORIES  
FROM CHINA



# Snake-bite Doctor

and Other Children's  
Stories from China



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# How Luo Wenying Became a Young Pioneer

*Zhang Tianyi*

The sixth-grade pupils had made friends with some steel workers and often corresponded with them. Once the Young Pioneers of the Second Troop wrote a letter in which they referred to Luo Wenying. Here is how the letter ran:

Dear Uncles,

You wrote in your letter, "It's great news to hear that Wenying has pulled himself up and joined the Young Pioneers. This is the best present you youngsters have given us."

When we read to this point, we were so happy that we hoisted Wenying on to our shoulders. Wenying laughed and his eyes brimmed with tears.

The last time we met you, Uncle Liu asked Wenying why he hadn't joined the Young Pioneers. Wenying's face burned with embarrassment. He had made an application to join, but it had not been approved because he was falling behind in his studies.

Actually, Wenying already cherished an ideal of becoming a steel worker just like you uncles. But we, his classmates, criticized him saying: "Wenying, didn't the steel workers say: 'Now your job is to listen to the teacher, study well, and also build up a strong, healthy body.'"

Wenying glanced around at us and thought to himself:

"Just wait — you'll see!"

What he meant was that he'd show us he could do his studies well and build himself up physically! But today — today's already

Saturday. Why start getting busy just before the holiday week-end? Better start on Monday.

When Monday came around, Wenying hurried home immediately school was over. He had made up his mind not to dilly-dally as usual for four or five hours before going home, then thinking up excuses to avoid his mother's scolding while eating the supper that had been kept warm for him. Today he would get home promptly and then he would make full use of his time after supper! On the way, Wenying worked it all out like this: "I'm going to solve all the arithmetic problems and write the answers out neatly in my exercise book. Then, on Sunday I'll take it to show to the steel workers and ask them, 'Do you think I can be a good pupil?' And they'll say, 'Of course!' That's how it's going to be."

He got into such high spirits that he stuck his chest out, walked with big strides, and, without being conscious of it, went straight into the bazaar.

He spent more than two hours in the bazaar. He had a busy time visiting the stalls, even making a careful inspection of the chinaware. At one of the stalls he stopped before a display of penknives. He had to try the knives out to see whether they were as sharp as the one his pal Zhao Jialing had. And what he spent most time examining was a basinful of little turtles in front of a toy shop!

"I must talk mum into buying one for sis. I have to take care of my baby sister, you know!"

But Wenying suddenly became conscious of a sharp change in the appearance of the bazaar. He gave a start, looked up from the basin of turtles and saw that the lights had been turned on all round.

"Oh, gosh, how awful!" He sprang up and hurried off. "Late again today!"

As he turned into the lane, Wenying walked faster and faster. He was keen on making a good job of his homework.

"The steel workers are so concerned about me. I'm going to make myself eligible for membership in the Young Pioneers. I must. . ."

All of a sudden he heard a loud sharp "pa ta".

"Mm, who's playing pellet billiards?" Wenying peered through the window of a confectioner's store, but not being satisfied with the view, decided he might just as well stop and go inside for a look.

Ah, but what could one do about it? It was just impossible for Wenying not to see this one through, because in the corner of the board was one of those real tricky shots that only an expert could handle properly! The big fellow who was playing made a hard lunge with the billiard pole — missed! Wenying waited until it came to the big fellow's turn again — no good, he missed again.

Wenying itched with impatience. Bother! Here's a fellow who's got to rush home to have supper and then do eight arithmetic problems and a page of brush-writing — and this big hulk of a player can't shoot straight in five tries! On the sixth try, the big fellow abandoned the corner shot and aimed at something else. Wenying saw no way out but to go on waiting. He often found himself faced with impossible dilemmas of this sort.

In this manner, he whiled away the time and got home very late. For supper, he contented himself with gulping down a few mouthfuls. He wasn't in the least worried whether this was a healthful way to eat and was anxious only to save time for his homework.

"Wherever are you off to now?" his mother demanded in astonishment when she saw him put down his chopsticks and start out through the door.

"I'm going to buy an exercise book."

"Why didn't you buy it right after school, on your way home?"

"I didn't have time, mum."

That Monday it was the same as ever. By bedtime, Wenying was still staring at the second arithmetic problem, tired out and worried. Better leave it till tomorrow morning, he decided. Thus, what with dividing his time between a bit of reading picture magazines and a bit of brush-writing, it was eleven o'clock before he climbed into bed. The next morning he got up late. But he still hadn't had enough sleep and dozed through his classes.

"Just look at you!" his mother scolded. "Who told you to be so greedy for play?"

"Greedy for play?" Wenying got red in the face and pouted. "Perhaps you think I was enjoying myself! I was worried all the time!"

True enough, Wenying hadn't enjoyed himself even at play.

We used to tell him: "All you think of is becoming a steel worker, but you don't try a bit to prepare yourself now. Day after day slips by and you waste a lot of time. Do you think that'll do?"

"Who said it'll do?" He bent his head and his hands played with the corners of a jacket. "Our teacher, Miss Zhou, told me that time is precious and that we must count the very minutes and seconds to make the best use of them. That I know. But, it seems that — I don't know why — the moment I don't watch my step, I'm back in the old rut again."

We all decided to help him out.

"Wenying, let's do our homework together. Let all five of us go to Li Xiaoqin's home to do our arithmetic problems. What do you think?"

"All right, let's begin next week."

"No. Today."

"All right, so let's make it today. Agreed!"

Everybody was in high spirits. Wenying also snapped out of his depression.

That day, after classes were out, we sent Jialing to take Wenying straight home. When they parted, Jialing reminded him: "Don't forget! Before half past six!"

"I know, I know."

"Wenying," Jialing said, turning back after a few steps, "start right after supper, will you? And don't go anywhere else. . . ."

Wenying felt that Jialing was fine in every respect except that he was a bit of a chatterbox.

"My goodness, what a fussy one you are! I give you my word — not a minute late. Good enough?"

Immediately after supper, Wenying got his books and other things neatly together. He knew his mother was watching him, every now and then glancing at him with a pleased look on her face. He pretend-

ed he hadn't noticed her watching, nor did he tell her that he had joined the little home study group. He was afraid that his mother would say, "Fine, now that's what I call a good boy!" or some such thing, which would make his face turn a deep red.

He kept his head down, absorbed in what he was doing, put the arithmetic exercise book in his school bag, and then, reflecting a moment, took it out again. He decided not to carry the school bag out. "If I did," he thought, "people meeting me in the street might think, 'Ah, see, this lad is just coming home after playing around for hours!'"

Wenying found an old newspaper and began wrapping his things in it. Suddenly his little sister came running in on bare feet, gingerly holding a picture magazine in her hands. It had just arrived from Wenying's dad.

"Wrap this too, brother. Wrap this too!"

Well, what a coincidence! Seems as though dad knew that he was going to take part in the home study group today! Just in time to take the picture magazine to Xiaoqin's home, for everybody to read together whenever they wanted to take a respite. Afterwards, he would turn the magazine over to the study group as group property.

"Fine, that's a good child." Wenying took the picture magazine from his little sister, glanced at its cover and unwrapped his paper bundle to put the magazine in. Then he paused, looking at the cover again.

"Who's this?" he asked himself. "Maybe a model worker?"

He was about to put the magazine in the bundle, then again hesitated. Ah, who could it be? The face in the cover picture seemed familiar to him.

Wenying couldn't help but flip over the table of contents. But once he had started, he couldn't resist thumbing through the whole magazine to get an idea of its contents.

"I'll just take one look through. That won't hurt." He looked, first at this, then at that picture. "Mm, what's this one about?"

For the answer, he had to read the caption beneath. Wenying read it word for word. Then he looked at the picture again, as if to see

whether the caption was correctly written. That set him reading a few more lines. All this while, he was hurrying himself:

"Enough, enough. Better be off now! . . . Look at this peasant uncle! What a physique!"

But time doesn't wait on people. Suddenly, Wenying looked at the clock, threw aside the magazine, and jumped up.

Six forty-two!

"Mum, isn't our clock fast?"

"No, I put it right by telephone today!"

Here's a pretty go! Wenying grabbed the paper bundle, put it under his arm, and was about to go after a word with his mother. But he had an afterthought.

"Wenying! Why are you late?"

"Wenying! Why are you back at your old game?" his classmates would be sure to ask.

He stared at the paper package, uncertain what to do, for it would be embarrassing to go to Xiaoqin's house now. He felt so bad about it that the tears came.

"Go, go. Never mind, as long as you really change from now on," a voice inside him said.

But who knows how his classmates would feel about him now? If he went, would they even bother to speak to him? He had broken faith! He had gone back on his own word as if it were nothing! The others would surely tell Miss Zhou, and most certainly the steel workers too. Oh dear, how could he face them!

"Uncle Liu, won't you still be friends with me?"

The thought brought two tears rolling down Wenying's face.

If only it were still not yet half past six. . . . But the hours and minutes would never come back! There was no way to snatch back wasted time.

He was quite ready to own up to his mistake before his classmates, to bear their criticism, if only they would still be willing to remain his friends and let him stay in the home study group and help him study. Hereafter, he'd never be late again!

Time was slipping by and it was getting later and later. Wenying



felt sorrier than ever, angrier and angrier with himself.

All of a sudden, he gave a start. He thought he had heard someone calling his name.

He pricked up an ear to listen, but all he could hear was his little sister singing off-key some scattered verses from *The Little Mouse on the Lamp Stand*, with a bit of prompting from mum.

"Who'd be coming to look for me now?"

But, Wenying, how wrong you were! How could the Young Pioneers throw you aside and leave you on your own? Listen, what was that?

There really *were* people calling his name. He knew that voice — it was Jialing. Then that other high-pitched voice belonged to none other than their little group leader Xiaoqin. She also had come to look for him. What more was there to be said now? Of course, Wenying would run out to meet them, shouting, "Coming, coming!" and then go off with them to do their homework together.

But Wenying, to his own embarrassment, could do no such thing. When Xiaoqin and Jialing came in, he wanted to hide, but could not. He bent over the picture magazine and pretended to be reading.

"Wenying," Xiaoqin shouted as she burst into the room, "why haven't you come to study with us?"

Wenying felt both happy and embarrassed at the same time. He turned aside to avoid looking at his two friends.

"What's the matter?" Xiaoqin stood at the door, staring at him. She lightened her footsteps and approached him slowly. "Are you ill?"

"No."

"Then let's go." Jialing put his hands on Wenying's shoulders and exchanged glances with the girl.

Wenying bit his lower lip hard for fear he would burst into tears in another moment. After a long while, he barely controlled himself enough to say, in a voice you could scarcely hear: "I'm not going. . . I'm busy."

"Busy? How's it you're busy enough to read the picture magazine?" Xiaoqin pulled him on to his feet. "Come on, let's go. Everybody's waiting for you."

So his classmates were waiting for him after all! Xiaoqin never told fibs.

Jialing further told him:

"If we hadn't found you at home, we would have gone looking for you in the bazaar. And if you weren't there, we would have searched the streets and even asked the policemen to help us find you. We were going to find you by hook or by crook to get you to come studying with us. That's what our little group decided."

In that case, let's hurry! Not a second must be lost!

The schoolmates said good-bye to Wenying's mother, who was so delighted that she grasped Xiaoqin's hand and said, "This is fine, fine. . . ."

Wenying's face was burning. He pulled Xiaoqin away and ran out of the door. Then, as suddenly, he rushed back, grabbed the picture magazine and flew out again in big, bounding strides.

The three friends went off together, laughing and shouting all the way.

Not a bad evening's work that day! There was even time for a lot of good fun after the homework was done. And Wenying hadn't been so happy for a long time.

"Now I really must buckle down," Wenying made up his mind, "and never waste my time again."

He often recalled to mind what the steel workers had written to him in their letters: "We hope you will learn to manage yourself."

He raised an objection with Xiaoqin.

"From now on, you don't need to send anyone to take me home after school. You'd have to go so far out of your way and waste so much time. I can manage myself well enough."

"All right," Xiaoqin replied after a moment's thought. "Our little group will trust you to keep your word."

And Wenying kept his word. He also did better and better in his studies.

"But phew! it wasn't easy at first," Wenying says to himself when he thinks back to those days. "The first two days went off all right. There was no one from our group to escort me home and I managed





to discipline myself into going straight home. But the third day wasn't such smooth sailing. . . ."

On the third day, a high wind blew up. After school, he went by the entrance to the bazaar and couldn't help worrying over that basinful of turtles. How are they doing on a cold day like this — are they as lively as usual in the water?

"Really, can reptiles catch cold?" he asked himself. "Why not go and take a look, eh? . . . But hold on there!"

He took a few steps, itching with curiosity. Just a look at the turtles only, absolutely nothing else — nothing wrong with that, eh? Surely one can make allowances for a little matter like that?

Look out, not so fast! Think it over.

"No!" Wenying got control of himself.

As for that confectioner's store in the lane — well, no one was playing pellet billiards but there were three people there playing skip-checkers — he could see that at a glance. What he couldn't see was whether they were playing well, and who was winning.

How about it? Just one tiny look — only one, quick, tiny little look. Eh?

"Just a little, tiny. . . ? Blow, it's *still* NO!"

He let out a disappointed sigh. Really, you know, skip-checkers isn't like pellet billiards. If I only take one look today, I'm determined not to do it again, beginning tomorrow — surely that doesn't matter?

He suddenly thought of Uncle Liu and the other steel workers. If they knew what thoughts were going through his mind at this moment, what would they say?

"Humph, back to his old tricks!"

Wenying set his face straight ahead, and without turning, firmly headed for home.

After that it was much better. For instance, one day he noticed a date on the ground. He only paused to examine the matter briefly: "Hmm, was it dropped by the date vendor or someone eating dates?" Then he sent the date flying into the distance with a kick.

"Where did it go?" Never mind! He had other things to do. In the old days he would not have given up until he had found it.

But that strange date soon came bouncing by itself all the way back to him. You see, a short distance off, another boy had given it a kick. Wenying promptly sent it back with another kick. The other boy blocked the rolling date as if it were a soccer ball. Then he gleefully waved to Wenying and shouted:

"Come on, I'll play goalie! You kick!"

Wenying hesitated, but for only a couple of seconds. Then he said:

"I haven't got time. It's not playtime now." He made a gesture with his hand as he hurried off. "You better go home soon too, pal."

All this Wenying had reported to Miss Zhou and to his home study group.

Dear uncles in the steel mill, you see how Wenying is trying his best to follow your examples. That's how he turned over a new leaf.

And now, Wenying has already formed new habits. When it's not time to play, you couldn't tempt him to play. He'd just pay no attention to you. He studies, does some house work, exercises, plays and goes to bed at regular hours, never again wasting time. He now has time to help his mother around the house and to take care of baby sister. This is how he describes himself:

"Before, I never could manage to save time, and simply couldn't find enough time for anything. I love baby sister. She falls down sometimes, but never cries, only shouts: 'Brother, pick up me!' It took me some time to make out what she meant. Another time she said, 'My goo'ness, I got cold in my button.' What do you think she meant by that? She can't say she wants to blow her nose, only says, 'I got bee-bee on my nose!'..."

"Wenying," Miss Zhou interrupted him, "we can talk about your little sister's misuse of grammar and composition some other time. We must also pay attention, you know, to economy in our speaking and writing. One must speak more to the point, and not go chattering on about everything under the sun that comes to mind."

Well, that's all we'll say for now.

Our respectful salutes!  
(Signed)

## The Earlier the Better

*Wei Jinzhi*

Chen Bugao was both clever and worked hard at his studies, and should have been regarded as a good pupil. He had, however, one weakness, which was, he was rather selfish. But he was unaware of it himself. He lived by the principle of "neither borrowing nor lending". For example, whenever someone wanted to borrow a pencil or a piece of rubber from him, he would knit his brow and say sternly, "Why do you always forget to bring them? Look at me, I don't like either to borrow or to lend. I never use other people's things and when someone asks me to lend him something of mine, I would of course. . . . All right, I'll lend it to you this time, but next time. . . ." In fact, what he feared was his own things being used by other people, and it was not true that he didn't covet other people's things.

One day, after school had finished, Chen Bugao returned to the classroom to fetch his school-bag after playing for a long time on the sports ground. There was no one left in the classroom. Taking out his bag from under the desk he was about to put it on his shoulder and leave the classroom when he suddenly noticed a book left under Wang Nianci's desk. He casually picked it up and glanced at it: Hey, it was the very book called *A First Year Primary School Pupil*, which he had tried unsuccessfully to buy several times. If he really didn't want other people's things he could return it to Wang Nianci, or hand it in to the teacher. It wouldn't be too bad even if he took the book home to read and returned it to the owner the next day. But he didn't do this. At first, on seeing the book, he felt confused for a moment. Then, finding that there was nobody around, he quickly put it into his bag and left immediately.

As he hurried home, his heart thumped rapidly. To comfort himself, he thought: "Evening classes will begin soon. Even if I didn't take the book someone else would." Then he thought: "It's only this once, and anyhow, I am not stealing it from him." But his heart was still thumped until he decided to read the book through that night and return it to Wang Nianci the next day; then he felt a little more composed.

Immediately after supper, he started to read the book. But, unfortunately, his mother was feverish that evening, and went to bed very early. When she woke up, she found that it was already ten o'clock, and that Chen Bugao was still reading. So she urged him to turn off the light and go to sleep. He had no choice but to reluctantly put the book onto the bookshelf, take off his clothes and go to bed. He had only read one-third of the whole book. What could he do? He thought that he must borrow the book from Wang Nianci for two more days; what else could he do? •

The next morning, when he opened his eyes, he saw at once that the book was still standing proudly on the shelf. He had over forty books, all lined up in a long row, but none of them were as thick or as big. Several of the small books which he had bought himself put together wouldn't be as thick as this one volume. He felt proud of being able to read such a thick book. If he owned a book like this, wouldn't he be even more proud of it? He took the book out of the shelf again and looked at the picture of the little girl on the cover. She was bending over a desk and glancing at him with a smile. After this, he became even more unwilling to return the book to Wang Nianci. However, it belonged to him, and he had to return it. If he didn't it would be stealing. When he got to this point Chen Bugao's face went red. He stroked his hair and then stood with his hands on his hips pondering over the problem for a long time, trying to find a way out, but in vain. So he hurried to school.

Wang Nianci was frank, outspoken and warmhearted by nature, he was really a good pupil; but he was rather free and easy. After losing his book, he didn't first of all ask whether he had lost it himself? Instead, he claimed that it had been stolen. As soon as he entered



the classroom, he shouted in a loud, confident voice: "I know definitely who's stolen my book; I have already told Mrs. Jin. He'll be in disgrace when he's found out."

On his way to school, Chen Bugao reasoned that it was Wang Nianci's carelessness that made him leave his book in the classroom! But, as he stepped into the classroom, Wang Nianci was in the middle of his shouting with his face flushed. When he heard this, Chen Bugao felt very angry. Just because Wang Nianci was too stupid to realize that it was his own fault, he now suspected him of having stolen the book. That's like repaying kindness with hatred. But, what should he do? Will the others believe him if he explained that he had picked the book up from under the desk? He sat in his seat with a red face, in a complete dilemma.

In fact, Wang Nianci didn't in the least suspect that Chen Bugao had taken his book. He hadn't even noticed the expression on Chen's face. After the first lesson was over, Wang Nianci came over to him, and tapping him on the shoulder he made a face at the classmate sitting in front of them, hinting that it was he who had stolen the book. At this, Chen Bugao felt embarrassed. Seeing Wang's wry face, he wanted to laugh, but how could he laugh! At the thought that, instead of suspecting him, Wang Nianci wrongly suspected another person, he began to feel guilty, and intended to tell Wang Nianci the whole truth. However, on reflection, he felt that it was now too late. If he had poured out the truth as soon as he entered the classroom, or if, when he stepped into the classroom, he had held up the book and lightly patted Wang's head with it and returned it to him, the whole class would surely have burst out laughing. Wang Nianci would probably have stuck out his tongue and scratched his head and face. Everything would have been fine! But, he hadn't behaved like that. And now, it was too late.

The third lesson was Chinese language, which was taught by Mrs. Jin. Before the lesson began, Mrs. Jin announced that Wang Nianci had lost a book, and hoped that whoever had picked it up would hand it back. If Chen Bugao had taken this opportunity to tell the truth, although it was a bit late, it wouldn't have been too late.

But Chen Bugao lacked the courage to do so, he was afraid of making a fool of himself before his classmates, so he again missed his chance.

During her lecture, Mrs. Jin kept a sharp eye on the expressions of all the pupils. Eventually she thought she found out something. She paid special attention to Chen Bugao. As a rule, Chen Bugao was very lively. During class, he used to stare at the gestures and expressions used by Mrs. Jin in her lecture, then he would imitate her airs and movements, sometimes with a faint smile and sometimes with a frown. But today, he kept his head lowered, only casting an occasional glance at her and dared not look directly at her. Whenever their eyes met, he immediately bent his head and avoided her eyes. He stared at his textbook, but nothing went in. His thoughts went off into wild flights of fancy: Was Mrs. Jin still staring at him? Should he tell the truth? What would the consequences be if he did so? But, then he thought, especially as Wang Nianci didn't suspect him, it would be foolish of him to go and ask for trouble.

Although she suspected that Chen Bugao had taken the book, the teacher was uncertain what to do because as a rule, he behaved himself and was not in the bad habit of taking other people's things. Moreover, she was afraid that the boy might be frightened if pressed too hard. So she didn't call him out specially to have a talk. When school was over that afternoon, she pretended to take a walk and deliberately waited for him at the school gate. Chen Bugao intended to just say "hello" and then get away as soon as possible, but, Mrs. Jin kept chatting to him as they walked along together, until eventually they reached the school campus.

By then, Chen Bugao was aware that something was up. While he talked, his heart was beating furiously. He dared not raise his head to look at Mrs. Jin. Because he was trying to talk and work out a plan at the same time, he became so agitated that his face went red and his head was covered in sweat.

"In your opinion," the teacher eventually turned the topic of conversation to the lost book, "was the book lost by Wang Nianci himself or stolen by somebody?"

"In my opinion, he lost it," Chen Bugao blurted out.

"Lost it himself, but how do you know?" Mrs. Jin asked in surprise.

Under normal circumstances this quick-witted boy would have said: "Haven't you heard that Wang Nianci is always careless?" But, he became flustered and hesitated before replying, "I just think so."

This reply showed that he was being dishonest and still trying to cover up.

Instead of exposing him straightaway, the teacher said patiently, "It's bad to be so careless and as a result of his carelessness, Wang Nianci has lost his book; but the boy who picked it up is also not considerate. He should know how unpleasant the owner would get because of the delay in returning the book. He hasn't any right to keep it. He didn't work for it but has merely taken it from someone else. Don't you think it's disgraceful? In my opinion, if he's going to return it to the owner, then, he should do it soon, and moreover, the sooner the better. Do you agree, Chen Bugao?"

When he heard this, Chen Bugao felt extremely bad. He realized that Mrs. Jin already knew, so he couldn't pretend any longer. In fact, he wanted to return the book as soon as possible just as Mrs. Jin had advised a few minutes ago. But being astute, he waited for her to say to him: "Don't worry, you can give the book to me in secret." Then, he could hand it over to her. However, Mrs. Jin refused to say this, hoping that Chen Bugao would own up by himself, which would be much better. Therefore, when she saw that he still hesitated, she decided to end their conversation and leave it until the next time.

As it happened, the next morning, while on his way to school, Chen Bugao, because he was still upset, dropped his fountain pen in the mud in front of the school gate when he took out a handkerchief from his pocket. Soon afterwards, a PLA man, who was passing by saw it and picked it up. When he wiped away the mud on the pen and took off the cap, he discovered that it was an almost brand-new "Golden Star" pen. He immediately handed the pen in at the school office saying: "It was probably dropped by somebody in your school. Please give it back to the owner. It might, of course, have been lost

by a passer-by; in that case if someone comes to inquire about it, please return it to the owner." Then, someone in the office stuck up a notice on the window.

Chen Bugao always took great care of his own things, and above all he treasured this fountain pen. Under normal circumstances, he would have let everybody know about it at the top of his voice, just like Wang Nianci. But, since he had something to conceal, he surreptitiously asked his classmates one by one, and didn't dare tell Mrs. Jin. However, he felt as unhappy as if he had lost an arm. Only then did it occur to him that Wang Nianci might have felt the same after losing his book.

Soon practically the whole class knew that Chen Bugao had lost a pen and some people immediately reported it to Mrs. Jin. Therefore when the class was over, Mrs. Jin asked her pupils to look for Chen Bugao's pen. Wang Nianci was an energetic boy and he knew lots of people in the school. He was also a warmhearted boy, so, immediately after class, he started to ask around. His inquiries eventually led him to the school office.

Classes had already started and Mrs. Jin was giving her lesson. However, Wang Nianci in his excitement didn't hear the bell. Holding the fountain pen in one hand, and turning the door knob hard with the other, he rushed into the classroom. He had intended to cause a stir by shouting out the good news at the top of his voice. But, when he looked up and saw that Mrs. Jin was already standing on the platform and the whole class was sitting properly in their seats, he hurriedly wiped away the sweat from his face and shook his head shame-facedly.

"Is it Chen Bugao's?" Mrs. Jin asked with surprise and pleasure.

Wang Nianci promptly stood up and gave an account of his search in a breathless voice.

The whole class raised their heads in surprise, and looked at the fountain pen and then at Wang Nianci.

Then, Mrs. Jin said cheerfully: "First of all, we should be grateful to the PLA man; he liberated and protected us, and now,

he's returned this fountain pen. The PLA men set us a good example. Secondly, Wang Nianci has done a good turn for one of his classmates; we should learn from him. And thirdly, Chen Bugao has now got back his fountain pen, we should also congratulate him." With these words Mrs. Jin got down from the platform and went over to give the pen to Chen Bugao.

But, just as the other pupils' attention was concentrated on what Mrs. Jin was doing, Chen Bugao suddenly burst into tears. He laid his head on his arms, and sobbed so much that his shoulders heaved.

Everybody in the classroom except Mrs. Jin was absolutely baffled by this.

"Chen Bugao, why are you crying?" Mrs. Jin asked deliberately.

Chen Bugao stood up and wiped his face with his sleeves, and was about to say something. But, as soon as he opened his mouth, he started crying again. Mrs. Jin told him to sit down and then said to the class: "Let me explain then. The truth of the matter is Wang Nianci left his book in the classroom, and afterwards, Chen Bugao picked it up and took it away. Is that right, Chen Bugao?"

Chen Bugao nodded his head.

"He intended to return it to Wang Nianci, but, later on, he couldn't bear to part with it, is that right, Chen Bugao?"

Chen Bugao nodded once again.

"Now, we have seen that the PLA man hand in Chen Bugao's pen to the janitors' office and Wang Nianci had brought it here for him."

Only then did the pupils realize the truth and gave an unanimous sigh of relief.

"Well, boys," Mrs. Jin asked at last, "What do you think Chen Bugao should have done?"

Some said that one should always return things to the owner whenever one finds something; some pointed out that Chen Bugao mustn't be so selfish again, and others suggested that they should all follow the example of the PLA man. . . .

"Right," Mrs. Jin concluded at last. "What you have said is quite right. In a word, we should help each other, and not be selfish. From

now on, we should all help Chen Bugao, and we must all stick together. . . .”

Next day, Chen Bugao returned the book to Wang Nianci and apologized to him. From then on, they had become close friends.

## A Brave Person

*Shi Yanbing*

It was dawn. The sun had just risen. From the other end of the recently-paved cinder path could be heard the sound of footsteps. A couple of young men appeared. The stout one, Chen Kuogen, wore a white cap. From beneath the collar of his white shirt peeped the gaily-coloured border of his yellow sweater. The tall one, Jin Weide, had a basket-ball in his left hand and walked like an athlete.

"We're going to practise at the sports ground today after class, at four o'clock." Jin explained. "We've a match tomorrow. The Brave Team versus the White Doves."

"At four? What a pity! There's going to be a meeting of the editorial board of our class newspaper\* after school. As soon as the meeting's over, we're going to put out the issue."

"Oh, so you've been promoted, you're a good student now! The editorial board! You'll have nothing to do with our team now!"

Jin's words irritated Chen. "A good student!" That meant to be well-behaved, which was not in the least brave. He said immediately, "I'm not what you think. I'll only go to the meeting if I feel like it. If I don't feel like it, I don't go."

Jin patted Chen's shoulder and challenged: "Let's see how brave you are!"

"OK!"

Jin was a first-grade student in the Mingguang Junior Middle School. There were quite a lot of "heroes" in their class. For example, while others filed into the classroom after the morning break,

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\* The paper is written up on the blackboard.

they swaggered about at the back. During class, they played tricks. One day, they set fire to an exercise book with a match and threw it among the seats. The whole class was in turmoil. The "heroes" laughed heartily and were having fun!

Chen was still at primary school. Because they were neighbours he and Jin were bosom pals. He looked up to Jin who was already at middle school, and seemed almost an adult! In fact he imitated Jin's way of talking and his mannerisms. He supported Jin's ideas on bravery and decided to make himself a "hero" too. To prove his courage, he did not go to the meeting that afternoon, but slipped away from school. . . .

It was very late as usual when he returned home. Grandma was washing the dishes and chopsticks. She grumbled: "You're always late! You deserve a good hiding!"

"Now that we have a democracy, you can only use persuasion and education — beatings are not allowed."

Grandma got his meal ready and said with a frown, "I'm always persuading you, but you don't pay any attention to me."

The truth was, he did not ignore his grandma's words. He sometimes felt she was quite right and that he should give up his bad ways, but his resolutions were short-lived. For example, he was now thinking what excuse he could make to the other editors. He seemed to hear Jin's voice saying, "Don't 'confess' to them. That means you've given in. What a lousy coward!" Then his own conscience spoke, "Tomorrow I won't go to the match. I'll finish the drawing for the paper. After that I'll admit my mistake and they can't hold it against me." Brooding over this, he felt his cheeks burning and he was ashamed of himself. In the end he thought of compromise. He'll tell them that he had a stomachache and could hardly stand. Then he would go and finish the drawing for the paper. In this way his classmates wouldn't doubt his courage nor had he given in.

The following day, Chen took off his yellow sweater, deciding not to go to the match. Meanwhile he managed to steer clear of Jin.

In the classroom, many students crowded round the newspaper. Chen could distinguish the blue and red headlines from a distance.



Good! The paper was out! He felt relieved. Suddenly somebody cried out, "What's this? Two empty spaces! It's like this in every issue."

"Where's the picture? Why is there an empty space? Why didn't Chen draw something?"

As soon as Chen stepped into the classroom he wanted to withdraw again. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was Wang Ling. He frowned and asked: "Chen Kuogen, what's the big idea? Every time we compile a new issue, you disappear, so that there are no pictures. You know very well that no one on the editorial board can draw except you."

"I had a stomachache yesterday. I could hardly stand!"

Wang Ling said sternly, "You've let the whole class down! It's disgraceful to play basket-ball behind our backs when you should be working."

Chen sniffed. He thought, "It's all finished. It's out now. Better leave it as it is." To show his "courage", he declared loudly: "I intended to draw something for you, but now you've attacked me, I won't."

He reached home crestfallen. Taking his yellow sweater from the wardrobe, he thought: "Since I've fallen out with them I'll go and play."

The paper was without pictures. The spaces where the drawings should have been were filled with criticisms of Chen. Furiously Chen chalked one cross after another on the blackboard newspaper, to show that he hadn't given in and would no longer have anything to do with it.

The whole class was boiling with indignation. They didn't want an editor like Chen. They held a meeting to dismiss Chen from the editorial board and put Wang Ling in his place.

Chen hoped that one day they would make a mess of their pictures and come begging, "Chen, we need your help. Please come back on the editorial board, please." Then he would do it. Otherwise he wouldn't. Every time the paper came out he cast a sidelong glance at it. The newspaper on the blackboard was full of pictures and

words. His classmates crowded round it delightedly. Chen said in a loud voice, "What sort of a rabbit is that, with ears straight up like two horns?"

His words were met with disapproval by his classmates.

"Rabbits are like that when they're frightened."

"You wouldn't draw yourself. It's better to have a picture than a blank space."

Then a girl classmate said in a shrill voice, "Chen's too full of himself! He only draws when he feels like it!"

"What's all this about?" asked Wang Ling. "Anyone can point out mistakes in the pictures if there are any."

Chen blushed and clenched his teeth in anger.

It was no longer the same in the classroom. Art had always been Chen's favourite subject. The teacher would show the class Chen's drawings and his classmates would praise him. But now everyone acted as if they didn't know there was a talented artist in the class.

All except for Wang Ling who sat next to Chen. Every time he drew a picture for the paper he would show Chen his rough sketch and asked his opinion, "What do you think of this?"

To show that he hadn't given in, Chen answered coldly, "I don't know." The next time Wang Ling asked him, his answer was the same, but his tone was milder. He felt miserable. Why did he behave like this? The third time Wang Ling asked him, Chen replied, "There's nothing wrong with it." Then he turned away and left.

Whenever Wang Ling drew for the blackboard newspaper, he always looked on enviously. Chen felt that it was a great pleasure to draw for the paper. Wang Ling was popular. Wang Ling was a hero! But Chen could not take part in the work. He'd given up his job.

\* His classmates did not approve of him.

There was only one way out — to say to his classmates: "I'd like to draw for the paper again." But was that surrendering? Heroes didn't do things like that. It would be better if his classmates said something first, but they didn't.

The term would soon be over. After the exams there would be a get-together for their parents. The classroom needed decorating.





The newspaper must have more beautiful pictures. There would be more work for everybody. The editorial board of the paper must compile their last and largest issue on two blackboards. The old editorial board wasn't large enough. "We need to ask three more classmates to help us draw the pictures," said Wang Ling.

One volunteer put up his hand, then a second hand was raised. Chen stood up and said in a trembling voice: "Classmates, I . . . I . . ."

There was sudden chaos. Someone said Chen was going to mess up their paper again. Others exclaimed, "What shall we do if those blank spaces like dried bean-curd appear in our paper again!"

Wang Ling stood up. "I support Chen helping us. I believe he is brave, and he'll correct his mistakes."

After class Chen held out his hand to Wang Ling. "Thank you!" he said.

"Forget it!"

Chen swallowed and added hesitantly, "But I haven't given in to you."

Wang Ling smiled. "It's not a question of giving in. A brave man knows how to correct his mistakes."

From the kitchen came the smell of fried fish.

Grandma was in high spirits. Chen was painting a huge masthead with his whole body bent over his desk.

Grandma was murmuring cheerfully, "Since you know how to behave yourself at school, I don't need to push you."

"I'm already thirteen! A brave man knows how to correct his mistakes." He was repeating what Wang Ling had said without realizing it.

There was a knock at the door, and Jin came in.

"Hallo! Chen. Let's go and play basket-ball!"

"I'm drawing the masthead for the paper. Another time!"

"Oh, what a good boy!"

Jin was taken by surprise and blurted out, "I think you're scared. Afraid someone will tell you off? You gave in to them?"

"I haven't given in to anyone. You've given in to your weakness. Huh! You'll understand later!"

With these words Chen continued drawing a dove of peace on the masthead. He added a final touch to the dove's head and dotted in the eye. The dove suddenly became lively.

## Han Meimei

### *Ma Feng*

I had finished my job at the Zhaojiagou Co-operative Farm last November, and was going back to report to the authorities. I had to go through Shuanghe County on the way, and thought I would drop in and see the local primary school. I used to go there to borrow newspapers and books when I was working in the town last spring, and knew some of the teachers and the children.

Directly I got inside the doorway I ran into Lü Ping. Her teaching subject is reading and writing. She is an example to her profession. In fact she is quite famous, and is a member of the local people's council. I first came across her several years ago, when she was still a student and was even then burning with the desire to serve her country. The year that she graduated was the year that two new elementary schools were opened in the county, and there was a shortage of teachers, so that the county education authorities were looking out for new ones. Most of the graduates didn't see any future in teaching in elementary schools, and Lü Ping was the first one of her group to take it on. The others took on different things; some went to college, others worked in government offices, or took other jobs. The few who, like Lü Ping, started teaching, didn't make much of a success of it, got fed up, and wanted to change. But Lü Ping herself liked it from the beginning, and besides the actual teaching she was responsible for the school branch of the Youth League. She had done very well, and was greatly respected for her work.

We exchanged greetings as we met, and then she asked me straight out, "Comrade Ma, are you writing anything at present?"

But before I could answer she went on, "Would you like me to give you something to write about?"

"Why not," answered I, laughing at her eagerness. She smiled back in return, and took me into her room. After giving me a glass of water she went to a drawer, and took out a bundle of letters.

"These are some letters from an old pupil of mine who finished school last summer. I think you know her. Do you remember Han Meimei?"

I cast my mind back. "The name seems familiar," I said, "but I can't place her."

"How can you have forgotten! Don't you remember, you spoke very highly of her compositions?"

Now I remembered her clearly. A slender seventeen-year-old, with two long plaits. A quiet girl, but with a mind of her own, only average in most subjects, but good at composition. I had read these before. Well worded, thoughtful, and when she got on to the subject of her village, and the changes that had taken place there, how her love of it came out. I knew her village, Xiaoxianzhuang, too, and her father, a pig-headed old man who doted on his only child. He used to say to the neighbours that even if he had to beg he'd do it to keep his daughter at school, now that men and women were equal, and educated women could get big jobs. As all these memories came back to me, my interest quickened and I asked, "What is Meimei doing now that she's left school?" Lü Ping smiled. "You can see that from her letters," she said, folding them up and handing them to me, as the bell rang for school to start. "I'll have to go now. Read them while I'm at class, and don't go until I come back." She picked up her textbooks, and went off.

I settled down to read the letters one by one.

July 25

Dear Miss Lü,

I'm afraid I failed in the entrance exam for the secondary school. So did Zhang Wei, who also comes from our village. He was



at No. 2 School in the town, and today we went together to look at the pass-list outside the school. Of course we went through the whole list twice, from top to bottom, but we still couldn't find our names. . . . Zhang Wei burst into tears, and I felt it was terrible to see a great seventeen-year-old boy blubbering in public. He made such a noise that passers-by stopped to see what was the matter. I think even Zhang Wei realized how awful it was, because he turned round and ran home by himself. I ran after him, but I didn't catch him up.

I must say that I felt like crying myself when I realized I had failed, but I managed to hold the tears back, and told myself that crying wouldn't help. I would have loved to go to secondary school, but since I failed in the exam, I'd have to make the best of it and find a job. I remembered what you said before we left at the last Youth League branch meeting: ". . . if you don't get through the entrance exam for secondary school, you should make up your mind to start some productive work straight away. Whatever job you do in our new society has a future for you. As long as you work properly, you are taking part in building our nation." Miss Lü, I took these words to heart, because I felt they were true. So I decided that I would take up farm work.

But when I returned to the village, Miss Lü! You can't imagine the carry-on. . . .

Directly I arrived I saw that there was a bunch of people in front of Guan Di Temple. When they caught sight of me, they stared like anything and chattered like magpies. They were obviously talking about me, and when I went past them I could hear Li Yuqing clearly.

"Well, well . . . so the girl scholar couldn't get through the examination. Hee-hee!"

His sarcasm set them all tittering, and I felt my face go all hot. Li Yuqing is what you might call our village specialist in sarcasm. Always trying to show up other people's weaknesses. I didn't try to answer him back, but headed straight for home.

I found the whole family having their midday meal under a tree

in the courtyard. Their faces all grew stern when they saw me come in. Mother sighed, Grannie pursed up her lips and said, "H'm," and Father's moustache twitched as he burst out, "Shame on you! You've disgraced me!"

Oh, dear Miss Lü, what a way to be greeted by my family. It was the last straw, and I couldn't bear it. I felt the tears coming into my eyes, and rolling down my cheeks. When Father saw this, he banged his bowl of rice down with a crash that bounced the spoons and jars, and bawled at me in a terrible voice.

"What have you got to say for yourself? I wonder you dare to cry!" Mother saw I was very upset and tried to intercede with Father. "Don't be so hasty. . . . Don't you see Meimei is as unhappy as we are?"

Father's anger choked him. He couldn't speak, took up his unfinished rice, and stalked out into the street to eat alone. When he had gone, Mother tried to smooth me down. "Run and wash your face, dear," she said, "and then come back and eat your dinner. You'll only make Father worse if he sees you crying. You know what he gets like." I tried to pull myself together, thinking, "What's the good of crying? You'll have to put up with it," and managed to stop, washed my face and sat down to eat. My thoughts were racing through my head as I tried to find words to say why I had failed.

After a bit, Father came back, a bit calmer. He put his empty bowl down on the table, took out his pouch, filled his pipe and began to question me.

"What do you intend to do now?"

"Start working on the farm," I answered bluntly. I saw his moustache twitched again. "Farm work!" he bellowed. "Here have I been denying myself all these years, scrimping and saving every penny, so that you can learn to read and write, and what do I get for it? What's the good of anything?"

Then Grannie joined in, "H'm, H'm. . . . Didn't I tell you that it was a wicked waste to send a girl to school? D'you think a girl's going to change into a fabulous monster? Look at her, after five or six years at school. It was simply throwing good money away!"

I knew why I was sent to school. I was expected to get a good job afterwards and keep the whole family in comfort and respectability. No wonder, then, that they went up in the air when they heard I wanted to work on the farm. I tried to keep my voice calm as I said, "Grannie, education is useful on the land as well. Anyway, Father's getting on now. Somebody will have to help out, and there's only me to do it."

"Fat lot of good your workdays will be to us!" Father interrupted me.

"Dad, what do you want me to do? What is there besides farm work? Do you want me to sit at home?"

Father couldn't answer, but sat there with his head down, sucking at his pipe. A gloomy silence reigned until the bell of the co-operative farm rang for afternoon work to start. He took up his hoe, and walked off, muttering, "My! My! A ne'er-do-well for a daughter!"

Grannie started a regular tirade directly Dad had gone. She went on about Dad ever sending me to school, at me for not passing the exam, and wound up by rubbing it in that I was good for nothing at all. I didn't try to argue with her, but helped Mother scrub out the big iron rice-cauldron. Then I started off for the co-operative farm office.

All the members were out in the fields, except for the chairman, Han Quanyou, the accountant, and the old pig-keeper, Uncle Yunshan. Uncle Yunshan was talking when I went in.

"You told me before that I could have someone to give me a hand, and here I am still on my own. Fine words don't feed the pigs!"

The chairman explained that he had tried to talk several of the women into taking it on, but they regarded it as a dirty job and weren't going to do it. There wasn't a man to spare either, at this time of year: in fact, there was a shortage in the fields as it was. In the middle of this, Han Quanyou saw that I'd come in, broke off what he was saying, and called out to me. I told him why I'd come, and everyone cheered up.

"First-rate, first-rate!" Han Quanyou said warmly. "We're desperately short of workers, particularly educated ones. Nothing could be better." He thought it over for a minute, and then went on, "What'd you want to do? You can choose your own job."

I told him I'd do whatever needed to be done, and he and the accountant went into a huddle. Then Han Quanyou said, "What about being the storeroom-keeper, Meimei? Would you like that?" "I'll do what I'm told," I answered. "But Han Ersuo's doing that now. What's going to happen to him?"

The chairman sighed, and said, "We'll have to get him to help Uncle with the pigs. You'd find the storeroom all right: the work isn't heavy."

I could tell that they were trying to do me a favour, but I didn't like the idea. Miss Lü, you always used to tell us that Youth Leaguers must do the hard jobs, so why should I try to get an easy one? I thought to myself that nobody else wanted to work with the pigs, so why should Han Ersuo be made to? Ought I to get out of doing the dirty work? Besides, he was used to the storeroom and whatever I did I'd have to learn it from the beginning. The thoughts raced through my head, and there seemed to be every reason why I should look after the pigs myself. So, at last I said:

"If I look after the pigs, it will save you the trouble of transferring anyone."

There was an outcry at this. "You be the swineherd!" they gasped. Then Uncle Yunshan said, half in joke: "I don't want to put you off, but the smell alone will scare you away."

"Uncle, you managed to stand it, so will I," I replied with a smile.

They couldn't believe at first that I really meant it and all three advised me to take on the storeroom-keeping. Then they began to see that my mind was made up. The chairman gave me the job and said seriously:

"Meimei, the pigs are a major asset to our farm. It means a great responsibility. You should expect difficulties, and make up your

mind that you'll get over them. There aren't any easy jobs in this world."

So it was all decided. In the evening, the Youth League branch belonging to the farm held a party to welcome me. This was a great encouragement to work properly. So now, Miss Lü, I'm a regular member of the co-operative farm. I thought you'd like to know. . . .

Respectfully yours,  
Han Meimei

August 23

Dear Miss Lü,

I read your letter over and over again. Every word in it is an encouragement to me to stand up to difficulties, and it meant a great deal to me. I've been through quite a difficult time lately, and was in distress for a few days. However, thanks to the help of the Youth League branch, I've got over my troubles. Then let me tell you about it all.

We've got 46 pigs on our farm altogether, all in one big pen. I'm not surprised nobody wanted to look after them — it makes you sick to see it, a foot deep in dung and urine, dirty water and sloppy mud. The pigs wallowed in this muck, and were covered all over with it. Aiya! You can imagine the stink, the smell of rotten fodder, and bluebottles everywhere! Nobody could go near the place without wanting to clap their hands over their noses and run. It was the stink that got me down to begin with. It felt like a physical attack on my nostrils, and made me heave, particularly if it was just after I'd eaten. After a morning's work even my clothes stank. . . . But that wasn't the worst thing, although it was bad enough, but Father's attitude to me since I became the pig-girl. He grumbles at me and calls me a disgrace to the family, and Grannie is always on at me, and says it's disgusting for a girl to be mixed up with filthy animals. Mother doesn't curse me, but she heaves a sigh when she sees me. Of course the village is

gossiping about me. The first day I went to feed the pigs they came to watch me from a distance, and I could hear the comments. "Hah! Go to school to learn how to feed pigs. Wonderful!" "What a waste of talent!" "A good-for-nothing." And so on. I pretended I couldn't hear them and went on with my work, but at heart I was really fed up. It was bad enough to have to put up with curses at home, without the village joining in, and for some days I was in despair. My heart was heavy, and I was tempted to pack the job in.

The accountant of the farm — he's the Youth League branch secretary — sensed the state I was in, and had a long talk with me. "We don't do our work just to win praise," he said. "Sometimes we just have to grin and bear it. As long as we do it for the general good, and put our best into it, we must go on doing it even if we are laughed at or cursed. Sooner or later it will come out all right, and the world will understand." He said that when the co-operative farm was first started some people sneered and laughed at the very idea of a co-operative, but not long afterwards the same people applied for membership when they saw how well it went. The night after he had talked to me I couldn't go to sleep for ages, going round and round the problem in my mind. I decided in the end that I must stick to the job no matter what people said about me. The failure to put up with a disagreeable situation is a sign of individualism, isn't it?

After I'd worked this out I went on working as usual, and within a few days people stopped ridiculing me. I had plenty to think about, looking after the pigs properly. The idea came to me that the pigsty ought to be kept clean, otherwise even pigs might get ill. After this thought I consulted Uncle Yunshan, and suggested that we might clean out the filth. I thought he would agree readily, but to my surprise he bawled me out! "I knew it . . . you can't do this job. You can't stand the smell, I bet!" I told him that this wasn't the trouble. "Uncle Yunshan, it's not because I can't put up with it. It's because pigs ought to be kept clean and free from disease." But he wouldn't have it. "Pigs are dirty animals by nature. You can't keep them clean. Man and boy, in sixty years I've never heard of a clean pig." He was

adamant about it, and insisted that pigs liked dirt and that dirt did them no harm.

So my talk with him was a failure, because I didn't know how to put it to him. But I wasn't very downcast, and decided that I must make an opportunity for having another go. This time, I laid my plans better, and took several days over it, without him knowing. In any time I could spare I dug up the back numbers of the newspapers in the co-op office. I reckoned that there must be something in them about pig-keeping. Sure enough, I found two articles on pig-keeping, and one of them was about the need for cleanliness. It meant a first prize to me and I hastened to read it to Uncle Yunshan. The article explained why pigs must be kept clean, and gave two examples, one of a co-op farm where, in two years, there were no unhealthy pigs out of two hundred, because they were kept clean, and the other where there was a different kettle of fish; they didn't keep them clean and ten out of seventy pigs died of an epidemic last summer.

Uncle Yunshan listened to me and went into a soliloquy. "Oho! So the newspaper says the same as Meimei." I told him, "The newspaper must be telling the truth. Our newspapers don't try to fool us." He said, "Yea, yea." I could see I was getting somewhere and hastened to add, "We ought to keep it clean for the sake of the village hygiene. The people who live near the pen are already making a fuss about it to the farm." Again he echoed me, "That's true. People have been complaining a lot." It took a long time, but I won the day in the end. We made a decision to give the pigsty a real spring-clean, and when it was cleaned out, to train the animals to use a dung-passage, as the newspaper suggested, and keep it clean afterwards. I was overwhelmed when I'd got him to agree, and could have jumped for joy. However, it wasn't all plain sailing. To begin with, the pigsty was rather a big one, and there was so much filth that it would take the two of us over a month to muck it out. On top of that, Uncle Yunshan was a cripple, and wasn't able to do heavy work, but I couldn't ask the chairman for help at this time of year, when there was too much field work as it was. I couldn't think what to do, so I went to ask the Youth League branch secretary for advice. He was delighted

to hear of our plans and suggested at once that the Youth Leaguers should be asked if they would give us a hand voluntarily in the evenings. That very evening, when the Youth League met, the question was brought up, and everyone agreed to help! Two of them, in fact, were particularly enthusiastic — they live near the pigsty and have really deep feelings on the subject, as you can imagine.

We started the next evening, in the bright moonlight, and as we were sweating away I started off some songs. It was really quite fun; we laughed and jested and enjoyed ourselves. To begin with, only the lads came, but quite soon the girls came too, even quite young ones. It took us five strenuous evenings. We got the muck out, dumped it on the farm compost heap, right at the other end of the village, repaved the floor with clean dry earth — it took several cartloads — and then covered it with fresh straw. Uncle Yunshan and I drove the pigs down to the creek for a bath. . . . Everything went according to plan.

Now we muck out the pigs two or three times a day, and have started to teach them to use the dung-passage . . . it's rather hard going; they don't listen to what you tell them. But give us time. I think we will remould them.

The whole village is pleased with the new conditions. Those who live near the pigsty went so far as to say that I had done a really good job. But there were still voices. "Ever heard of a new broom sweeping clean?" "Pigs can live in a palace but it doesn't give them royal blood." Of course I heard Li Yuqing's voice raised in this strain.

Do you want to have some news about Zhang Wei? He's sulked at home ever since the day he came back with the bad news. He wouldn't show his face in the street, and sobbed at home. His parents were in a terrible state about him, and tried to tempt him to eat. I went round to look him up a few days ago. He had grown quite grey in the face, and his eyes were as swollen as ripe peaches. I did my best to persuade him to join in the farm work, but he wasn't having any. "I can't bring myself down to that," he said. "I can't understand you becoming the swineherd. What a frightful come-down for you." I told him that any honest work served the country, but before I could finish the sentence he burst out in a rage, "Shut up, can't you? I'm not







going to pretend to be a progressive, like you. Go ahead, if you want to show off. You're welcome to it." He made me so fed up that I walked out on him. The Youth League secretary tried to talk him out of it twice, and so did the farm chairman. But it didn't do any good. I have since heard that he argued his parents into selling a picul of wheat, to pay for his travelling expenses to Taiyuan, where he has gone to look for a job. The day before yesterday his mother was showing a letter from him all round the village, and letting the ones who could read feast their eyes on it. She didn't let the others off, but told them, "My boy Zhang Wei has been given a post in the provincial government, in the provincial government. Mark you." I've read the letter. It doesn't say what the post is. . . .

When Dad and Grannie heard about this they started nagging again, for envy. Not a meal-time has passed without them getting at me. Let them say what they like, I'm beyond caring. Come what may, I've made up my mind and I'm going to stick to it.

Let's talk again another time.

Yours respectfully,  
Han Meimei

September 30

My dear sister Lü Ping,

I am very proud that you let me call you sister. It makes me very happy. It is lovely to have a sister like you.

Dear sister, please don't think that I'm pleased with myself for such a small conquest. In fact, I do realize that it's not due to anything I've done. I read all the books on pig-keeping that you sent me, and read bits out of them to Uncle Yunshan. I used to think anyone could be a pig-keeper! Now I have begun to realize that it's a job for a scientific expert. The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know. It isn't at all a simple job. Take the question of food, for instance. Would you believe that it's a most complicated subject? Pigs need an elaborate special diet, with curious things like calcium,

and phosphorus and vitamin content. Before, they used to get the waste from the bean-noodle mill. If there wasn't enough, we had to give them sweet corn and so on. This was very extravagant, and besides, the pigs weren't much better for it. Now we've introduced changes. As well as whatever's left over from the mill, we give them a mixed diet, with green-stuff, corn shucks and water-melon rind. This is much better and a saving of crops as well.

Of course there were some complications. Uncle Yunshan couldn't bring himself to believe in it all. He's got quite cheerful about it, though, and our conversation goes all this, "Meimei, what's today's surprise? I hear you've got some new-fangled notion about feeding pigs with chopped sweet corn stems? I never heard of such a thing in all my born days!" I say, hopefully, that it worked all right according to other people's experience, but he answers, "I bet you read it in the newspaper, haven't you? You can't ignore what the papers say, but that doesn't mean to say you've got to treat it like absolute truth. Anyway, everyone knows pigs don't eat this green-stuff. Even if you put it in front of them they won't touch it." "They do eat some green-stuff," I assure him. "I've tried it on them and I can show you right away that they do, if you'll only believe what you see for yourself."

As a matter of fact, I'd tried it out the day before, because I guessed he would want evidence! I had given them some pigweed which I got from the fields, and they'd guzzled it like pigs, in fact! I kept a bit back to show Uncle Yunshan how well it went down. He stood watching, deep in thought, for a while. Then he said, "With this number of pigs, it'll take more time than we can spare to go round getting hold of the stuff." Yes, he was right. It is a problem. So I went to talk it over with the chairman and he found a solution. He said, "The very thing! Their food's in short supply just now." Straight away, he asked all the members to give a hand after the day's work, and bring back pigweed from the fields. Whenever I got the chance I went round all the households and collected all their vegetable waste and anything else they had which the pigs could eat. As time went on, they began to bring the waste to me, and old man Wu, who grows

water-melons, became a regular customer, and sent us his accumulation of melon rinds every day at noon on his way home for midday meal. When the harvest's over, we're going to plant two small plots to beet and cabbage for the pigs.

Our pigs are doing fine. Everyone says that they've fattened a lot in the last six weeks or so. They've also increased quantitatively! A few days ago one of the Whites farrowed, and had twelve snow-white piglets. They are darlings. No one could see them without agreeing. You may say that Uncle Yunshan and I have personally adopted them. We gave them their first warm bath the day they arrived, and are supplementing their feeds with diluted rice-water. Uncle Yunshan and I took turns to do night duty, in the first week, to make sure the sow didn't overlay them and squash them. Last spring the farm lost four in a night, overlaid. Uncle Yunshan and I are determined we'll have no such fatalities, and that we'll rear the whole litter.

On Mid-Autumn Festival Eve, the farm slaughtered one of our fat pigs, and shared out the pork. I was very unhappy that one of my pigs had to be killed, but after all, that's what I rear them for, I told myself. Also, the farm carters' team sold five of our big pigs in Taiyuan and bought a ginning machine, so that we can gin our cotton crop — we needed it because we've got a big area planted with cotton now. They came back with some news as well. They'd met Zhang Wei in Taiyuan. He had been an errand boy in a provincial government office, but he's now a worker in an engineering factory. He didn't like being an errand boy; he says it's nothing but doing other people's dirty work. Since they came back with the news, Mrs. Zhang has changed her tune. She now says, "My boy is a factory worker now. Of course, that's a very respectable job. Indeed, I understand that factory workers are the leading class!"

Dear sister, I've come to the conclusion that whatever our job is, if we really get into it, we can make anything more and more worthwhile. I'm enjoying my pigs now, and the village no longer looks down on me. Even Li Yuqing doesn't get at me, and his tone behind my back is quite different. "You see, education is necessary for any

sort of work. With a bit of education, you can even make a success of pig-keeping." The other villagers who keep pigs come to me for advice, and I read them bits out of my library. This morning, a colleague from another co-op farm came over, and asked me to tell her about "my experience of keeping pigs". My experience, indeed! Our pigs are healthy because we apply scientific methods, and we used our heads and got the method out of newspapers and books. It's no private invention of mine. But my colleague insisted that I should tell her all about "my experience". So Uncle Yunshan and I talked to her for a whole morning. She said they didn't keep their pigs clean in her farm, and three sows and five gilts died of some disease last summer. She says that her farm is going to apply our methods in future.

With regards,  
from your sister,  
Meimei

September 30

Dear sister,

I haven't written for a long time, because we were all busy with the harvest. The farm members all went out at dawn and returned after dusk, and had no time to get our pigweed for us. Uncle Yunshan and I had to drive the pigs out every day to the field where they had cleared the yams and sweet potatoes. We had two more litters to look after as well. And nowadays we have visitors who come and ask us about pig-keeping. . . . Uncle Yunshan and I are so busy sometimes that we don't even get time to eat.

But the harvest's all in now, and we had our Harvest Home last night. Five model workers were elected, and I was one of them. I still can't believe that I should be called a model worker! I don't think I've done all that much. I don't know much about pig-keeping yet, and have a lot to learn, and I haven't done nearly as much as I should. But they insisted on conferring the title. It is a tremendous

encouragement, of course, and I shall try to live up to it, and become a real expert.

The annual accounts have been settled, and I had over seventy workdays to my credit . . . that's over ten piculs of grain. Oh, sister, isn't it grand! All earned by my own efforts. Before, I had to live on my parents, but now I can earn my own living.

My father has just over 100 workdays to his credit, I haven't been mentioning him in my last letters, I know, but I can tell you now that it's all over. When I began to look after the pigs my father treated me very unkindly, didn't he? He got ticked off by the chairman and the Youth League secretary, and stopped doing it to my face. But he was miserable about it and went about with a hangdog expression. He began to stay at home too, and missed some time. He told Mother that he couldn't make himself go out when he'd lost all his interest in life. You see, he had pinned all his hopes on me, and it all crashed when I became the farm swineherd. Sometimes he stayed home all day, brooding. He wasn't a drinking man, but he began to drink. When the fit came over him he began throwing the bowls around, and would then throw himself down on the brick bed and go off into a stupor. Usually he wouldn't look me in the face, but behaved as though I didn't exist. Oh, Sister Ping, you can't think how horrid it was to be treated like this by my own father! I tried to put up with it as patiently as I could. For several months I was hardly at home except to eat or sleep. I felt sorry for Dad, really. Poor man, he is the result of the old days. Although he's a peasant himself, he looks down on manual labour. I was sure that he would understand in the end, even when things were at the worst, and he did, as you'll see.

Dad didn't come to the Harvest Home, but Mother did. She left before me, and was already home when I got back. I could hear her talking before I got into the house, "You'll never believe how much Meimei earned! Over ten piculs! Nearly catching up with you." Father held his tongue, but Grannie said in amazement, "What? Over ten piculs? Whoever would have thought it!" Mother went on, "Nowadays all the neighbours are saying that Meimei is a wonderful daughter. They congratulate me on having sent her to school, and say

they realize how useful it is to be educated, when they see how well Meimei has turned out! D'you know, Meimei was elected a model worker tonight!"

I heard nothing from Father, and when I got into the room, I saw he was hunched up in the brick bed, sucking at his pipe.

"Father," I said, "I would like to sell some of the grain and buy two piglets. It wouldn't be difficult for us to rear them." "It's your grain," Dad answered, without looking up. "Sell it if you want to." "Oh no, Father," I said. "It's the family's grain. I can't decide about it by myself." Grannie was thrilled, and said eagerly, "But it's a good idea! If we rear them successfully they'll fetch four or five piculs."

Before we could go on, the farm chairman came in, his face all beaming, and said, "Come on, Meimei. You've got to stand a treat all round!" I couldn't imagine what he was talking about, nor could my family. We sat dumb, but he went on to explain. He'd heard from the county government that I'm to be sent to the state farm at the capital of the province, to learn all about the new pig-keeping methods. Of course I was mad with joy. Mother and Grannie were as pleased as anything, but poor old Dad couldn't get a word out. He looked at me helplessly and then suddenly, to my horror, I saw two great tears rolling down his cheeks. He was crying! I'd never seen my father cry before. In a broken voice he said, "Meimei. I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry for the way I've behaved in the last few months. . . ." But then he couldn't go on. I didn't want him to; I knew what he wanted to say. I cried too, I don't know why, and that started Mother off. So everything came out all right.

I've spent the whole of today getting ready. Zhou Yue, another \* girl, who lives opposite us, is taking on my job. This afternoon the Youth League had a meeting and wrote out my references. I had many good wishes, and lots of advice. And was told to study as hard as I could and get to know everything there was to be known about pig-keeping. For my part I promised that I would do the best I could and that I wouldn't let the country down.

As we came out of the meeting we met Zhang Wei on his way home from Taiyuan. We were very pleased to see him, and began



chaffing him. "Hallo there, older brother. What's the news from the factory?" Zhang Wei didn't answer a word, but headed straight for home. We've heard since what's happened . . . he's left the factory for good. "Factory workers lead a dog's life," he says. "The job is dirty and heavy. There's so much bossing about!" He now thinks he'd be happier on the farm. He doesn't seem to like any job, and he despises manual labour. The Youth League's going to help him solve his problems.

Oh, Sister Ping, I'm off tomorrow. . . . I can hardly believe it. I'll write and tell you how I get on.

Yours,  
Mei

November 12

I read all these letters through at one stretch. I felt as though Meimei had been in the room with me. How could I now not admire her! She reminded me of Lü Ping, who had brought out these qualities in her, qualities of courage, resolution, and determination.

Lü Ping came back, and asked at once, "Have you read them? What do you think about them? Can you make anything out of them?"

I answered, "I don't have to waste time making anything out of them. They speak for themselves."

## Two Boys at the Seaside

### *Xiao Ping*

How glad Second Lock was to be visiting Granny again! It was over five years since he had been here.

Granny lived by the Yellow Sea. North of the village was a little estuary. At high tide it was one huge sheet of water — there seemed no end to it; but at low tide a stretch of golden sand appeared. South of the village were sand dunes covered with knot-grass, and from these dunes he could see the ocean. He loved to gaze at the sea, this vast expanse of sapphire blue, with golden flecks dancing over it. There were fish, crabs and lobsters in it. There must be some very big fish too. His teacher had told him that some sea fish were bigger than houses, but Second Lock had never seen fish of that size. He had not seen so much as a small one since coming here. He wondered where they'd all gone to.

With Granny lived Second Lock's uncle and aunt, their son Tiger, and their daughter Petal. Second Lock played on the beach every day with Tiger. The sand was fine and soft. They lay on their backs, unbuttoned their shirts and basked in the sun. Tiger was a year older than Second Lock, but not as tall; and since they were both in the fourth form Second Lock did not think much of him. True, he was a squad leader of the Young Pioneers; but Second Lock had become a Young Pioneer himself just before the holidays, and he thought his own squad leader far more capable than Tiger. On the other hand, Tiger did know many things which Second Lock didn't. He knew, for instance, just when the tide would turn, what kind of tide brought fish with it, and what kind of weather made the crabs come out. Each time he dug the smooth sand he could turn up a clam. Eventually,

Second Lock had to admit that Tiger knew much more about the sea than he did; but he couldn't understand why his cousin kept finding fault with him.

"Granny," he once cried, "I saw sails today! Snow white they were. Ever so many of them! Far out to sea, and they weren't moving at all!"

"Not moving?" put in Tiger. "How do you know they weren't moving? It's just that they were far away and you couldn't see, that's all!"

Another time, Second Lock picked up some pretty, boatshaped objects on the beach, and showed them to Tiger with delight.

"They're just cuttle-bones," Tiger gave a big snort. "We throw them away, but here you are bringing them home!"

And Petal ran to tell her grandmother:

"Granny! Second Lock has been bringing cuttle-bones home!"

Why couldn't the little busybody hold her tongue?

Second Lock liked to squat on the beach when the tide came in, to watch the waves rolling up from the distant horizon. When the roaring, foaming water seemed about to engulf him, he would jump backward. Then the waves receded just as they reached his feet, and cool salt water sprayed all over his face. The next moment the tide would be after him again, and he'd have to jump further back. In this way, he fancied, he would lead the sea right up to the foot of the sand dunes. But when he climbed one of the dunes, instead of following him, the sea gradually calmed down. Second Lock was disappointed. He had hoped to lure it right up over the dunes!

What Second Lock enjoyed most was fishing with Tiger. Once they took Uncle's fishing net without telling him, and ran to the estuary north of the village. The tide was rolling up.

"Quick, Second Lock!" Tiger called softly, pointing at the water. "Look at that shoal of fish!"

Not a single fish could Second Lock see. But from that moment Tiger seemed a grown-up in his eyes. He believed his cousin's every word, and carried out all his orders without hesitation. Sure enough, while they were still drawing the net ashore, Second Lock saw fish

leaping and struggling in it. Anxious and overjoyed, he grew hoarse from shouting. This one catch filled half a bucket. Second Lock stared at the fish, and could hardly believe his eyes.

When the tide had ebbed, he went with Tiger to the estuary beach to dig up clams. The clams were as big as Second Lock's fist, with thick shell beautifully marked; but they buried themselves so deep in the sand and the tide had washed the beach so smooth that Second Lock could not find a single one, however hard he looked. Each time Tiger used his hoe, though, he unearthed one. Then Tiger explained that there was a tiny hole over each clam's hiding place because it needed air, and Second Lock saw such holes all along the beach. Still, when he dug them up he discovered nothing except a few crabs the size of his thumb. He was very disappointed. At that, Tiger told him that most of the clams on that part of the beach had already been taken, but there were plenty left to the north of the estuary, and if Second Lock liked they could go there to dig for them.

Second Lock was too pleased for words! He longed to take a big box full of clams home with him. Then when school began he would spread five, ten, or even more clam shells on his desk, to the envy of his classmates. One would hold slate pencils, one ink, one red paint, another green. . . . His schoolfellows were bound to gather round for a look, and he'd give them one shell each. No, on second thoughts, he'd only give shells to his friends, not to those he didn't like.

But while he looked forward to being taken north of the estuary, his cousin seemed to have no intention of going. And pride prevented Second Lock from asking for any favour, much as he longed to go.

It was dusk one day when Second Lock and Tiger came back from the beach. Auntie and Granny were preparing supper, with Petal tagging after them. When Granny turned round, she nearly knocked the little girl over.

"How d'you expect me to get anything done?" she snapped. "I seem to have grown a tail."

Petal seized the hem of her jacket.

"Where is it?" she cried. "Let me see it!"

"Be a good girl now, Petal," begged Granny, holding a pile of bowls in her hands. "Go and play with Second Lock."

"I don't want to!" Petal pouted.

"*You* don't want to! Huh!" thought Second Lock. "I wouldn't play with you even if you begged me!"

After supper, Granny and Auntie washed up while Tiger swept the courtyard after feeding the pigs. Second Lock spread a mat on the threshing-floor in front of the house and lay down on it. The sky glittered with stars. From time to time a cool, salty breeze blew over from the sea. He couldn't sleep, partly because of the mosquitoes buzzing round him and partly because of his eagerness to catch those clams Tiger had told him about. Soon Tiger came along with another mat under his arm. He spread this beside Second Lock and lay down, then whispered:

"Let's dig for clams on the beach north of the estuary tomorrow. Are you game? Or don't you dare?"

"Of course I dare!" cried Second Lock, springing to his feet. "Why should I be afraid?"

"Don't shout!" warned Tiger, punching him in the leg. "We mustn't let my Dad know."

Second Lock opened his eyes wide.

"Why not?" he whispered.

"Why not? Children aren't allowed north of the estuary. You can get drowned there at high tide if you don't run pretty fast."

"Then what should we do?" Second Lock felt a little scared.

"It's all right. We'll start back as soon as the tide comes up."

Uncle came to the gate with a shirt thrown over his shoulders, and sent Tiger off with a message to the co-op. Second Lock was wildly excited, and started imagining all sorts of fascinating things before he dozed off. That night he had many dreams. He dreamed that he and Tiger dug up a whole basketful of clams. The basket became so heavy they couldn't lift it, and while they were struggling with it the tide bore down on them like a moving wall! He started crying with terror, while Tiger swam away. The tide drew nearer and nearer, and as he turned and raced towards the beach another great

wave barred his way. He jumped and woke up in a cold sweat, his heart drumming wildly. The red sun was rising over an island in the sea, and the threshing-floor was deserted.

Second Lock got up, and ran into the house with the mat under his arm. Auntie was carrying rice to the table, Tiger was feeding pigs in the courtyard, and Granny was telling Petal a story. As soon as they sat down to eat, Second Lock started shovelling rice into his mouth as if he were pouring it down his throat. Granny watched him in dismay and set down her bowl.

"Don't bolt your food like that, Second Lock!" she scolded.

Petal craned her neck to see what her cousin was doing, but he had already finished.

He slipped to the gate of the courtyard and waited there impatiently for Tiger. After what seemed an age his cousin appeared. They winked at each other and set off at a run.

"Tiger!" Uncle suddenly called after them. "Where are you taking your cousin? You haven't even swept the courtyard yet!"

Tiger came to a sudden stop, like a car abruptly braking. Second Lock's heart sank, but Granny came to their rescue.

"Let the boys go!" she said to Uncle. "They've been hard at their books for a whole year. Let them do as they like for a change. Even the devil has to have a holiday some time."

Then Uncle relented, simply warning them: "You're not to go north of the estuary, though."

Tiger shouted something in reply, then took Second Lock's hand and ran off with him again.

The tide was at low ebb. The sky was azure blue, and the sun on the golden sand dazzled their eyes. Tiny crabs were busily digging holes. They had dotted the smooth beach with balls of sand like peas, and were still throwing up more and more. The sand glistened in the sunshine like pearls, and whirled in the air for a second before falling to the ground. A warm breeze was blowing from the sea, carrying with it the tang of the ocean.

"Bother it!" Tiger stopped. "We forgot to bring a basket and a hoe."

Second Lock halted too. Tiger looked back, then cast a glance at the sun.

"Never mind," he said, waving his hand with a gesture of dismissal. "Let's go on. We can scoop them up with our hands and wrap them in our shirts."

They continued to run forward. The soft sand balls crackled beneath their bare feet, pleasantly tickling the soles of their feet, and soon they came to a line of jagged rocks. This reef was not very high, and at full tide only its top showed above water.

"This must be it!" thought Second Lock.

He turned his head, and found that Granny's house had disappeared. Ahead, in the estuary, a narrow white strip of water was still gleaming faintly, just as before, when he had looked across from the shore.

"Aren't we nearly there?" he asked.

"We've still quite a way to go." Tiger did not even look up. "We've only come three li out of ten."

"What! Ten li? Won't that take us right into the sea?"

But Tiger bounded forward without a word. And, not wanting to seem like a coward, Second Lock followed.

After crossing the sand, they came to a mud flat. The mud was sticky and slippery, and was embedded with sharp stones and broken shells. Second Lock cut his feet time and again, and found it harder and harder to walk the further they went. He picked his way carefully on tiptoe, but had to drag his feet out after every step. Even so, he stumbled several times, till his white shirt and trousers were smeared with mud, and his backside ached from falling. Not once, though, did Tiger fall. He pattered on, bringing his soles down flat on the mud, and stopped every so often for his cousin.

The sun was almost directly overhead by the time they reached the estuary. What had seemed a white thread from the distance was actually broad enough to carry a large junk. Tiger calmly stripped off his clothes and, holding them high above his head with one hand, waded slowly into the water; Second Lock followed his example, keeping close behind him. The tide was ebbing very swiftly. Second

Lock could barely keep his balance, and nearly fell again. Fortunately the water was not deep, reaching only to their arm-pits. Tiger supported his cousin with one hand, and so they reached the far shore.

They were now on a vast golden beach. It stretched as far as the eye could see, and not a soul was in sight! Tiger put down his clothes and set to work building two sand castles by the water. Second Lock was wondering what his cousin was doing when Tiger stood up and said: "I'm going further on, where there are masses of clams. But you must stay here to keep watch. Call me when the tide has turned and begins to wash these castles away. Then we'll have to start back at once."

Second Lock was not too pleased with this arrangement, but he had to agree to it.

Tiger ran away, naked as he was. Second Lock lay on the beach and fixed his gaze on the sand castles. The sun beat down on him, and soon a layer of white salt covered his body. Beginning to feel lonely, he sat up and looked around. Tiger was far away. In the distance, some seagulls were circling low over the ocean. All at once he felt quite deserted and began to panic. There was no one near. He couldn't even see his grandmother's house. What would he do if the tide rose suddenly? His flesh began to creep.

He remembered an accident that had happened the previous summer. It was a fine day and he was bathing with some other children in the river by his village. The water was clear, and not too deep. But all of a sudden they heard a roar from upstream, and someone cried out in alarm. When he looked up, he saw the river swelling. A crest of muddy water about two feet high was raging towards them. \*Terrified, he started to hurry towards the shore. Poor Little Fa of West Street cried for all he was worth.

"Take me with you, Second Lock!" he screamed. "I can't run!"

But Second Lock couldn't run either, so he wasn't able to help Little Fa. Luckily, Uncle Fushan was on the threshing-floor nearby. He rushed over with a wooden pitchfork in his hand, and pulled Little Fa ashore with it. The boy was white with terror. . . .



But gradually Second Lock calmed down. The sea was quiet, with scarcely a ripple on it. The gulls were still circling low. When he looked at the sand castles, they hadn't budged. The water had neither risen nor fallen. Second Lock had no idea how long he had been there, and was beginning to grow sleepy. He dared not sleep, though, and started scooping up the sand by his side to keep himself awake. He dug down and down till he reached something hard and slippery. He sat up quickly to look. A big, coloured clam!

He opened his mouth instinctively to call Tiger, but then thought better of it. He'd collect a whole pile of clams to surprise Tiger when he came back. "Ha!" he said to himself. "He's not the only one who can find them!"

Standing with legs wide apart, he bent down to dig again. In a little while he turned up another clam. He went on scooping, quite unaware of everything else. Sweat began to stream down his forehead, he broke his nails, and his fingers started to bleed; but he felt no pain at all. He tried to fix each clam in his memory, so that he could tell his mother and sister when he got home which he had caught, which was his first find, and which his second. . . .

The clams lay submissively on the sand, making no attempt to escape or even to stir. Still, Second Lock could not put his mind at ease. He moved them further from the water, built a high rampart of sand around them, and covered it with his shirt and trousers.

He went on digging in a frenzy, placing more and more "prisoners" inside his rampart. At first he dug only nearby, to keep an eye on them. Then, confident that they could not escape, he started digging further and further away, only going back for a look when he had to escort new "prisoners". Later, he discovered he was wasting a lot of time carrying the clams there one by one. So he took his shirt with him and wrapped each new find in it, not going back till he had collected about ten.

Time plays curious tricks on us. Sometimes an hour seems longer than a day, and sometimes a day seems to pass in a matter of minutes. Second Lock was so absorbed in his work that he lost track of the time, till he happened to raise his head and saw that the sun had mov-

ed quite far to the west. Then, with a start, he remembered the two sand castles. He raced back to have a look at them; but when he reached the shore he stood aghast. Not a trace of them could be seen: the stream had widened — the water in it was muddy.

Second Lock was horror-stricken. He rushed madly to and fro, waving his shirt and trousers and calling Tiger at the top of his voice, though he could see no sign of him. A long time passed before Tiger appeared to his left. Second Lock shouted louder than ever and ran towards his cousin, then turned to look back at the estuary. How quickly the sea had changed! Water was surging up the beach, swallowing five feet or more in the flash of an eye. Now Tiger was running to meet him too, but how slow he seemed! Even a three-year-old could run faster than that.

When Tiger came up with Second Lock, he understood everything at one glance, and glared angrily at his cousin in silence. By this time, the tide had reached them. The expanse of water was twice as wide as before. Second Lock looked at Tiger and burst into tears.

After a while, Tiger said, "Never mind! Let's try it! Hold on to my foot, and I'll try to tow you across."

Second Lock stopped crying and followed him into the water. As soon as it reached their shoulders, Tiger began to swim; but when Second Lock seized one of his feet they both began to sink. Then Tiger grasped Second Lock's arm and helped him back to the shore. Too stunned now even to cry, Second Lock clutched at his cousin, who had also turned pale.

The foaming water was rising fast. It had nearly reached Second Lock's "prisoners'" rampart. Catching sight of his cousin's white cotton trousers, Tiger snatched them up and tied the ends of the legs with his belt, then soaked them in the water, whirled them through the air and plunged them again in the tide. The legs, filled with air, floated up like water-wings, and grasping the top of the trousers firmly, Tiger pulled Second Lock to him. Without a word he pushed him into the water and tucked the inflated legs beneath his arms.

"Hold on tight!" he ordered. "Don't let go, whatever happens!"

Using one arm to swim, with the other Tiger tugged Second





Lock after him, while the air in this improvised buoy hissed as it escaped.

This was a difficult trip! Tiger forged painfully forward, foot by foot. By the time they were halfway across, the two water-wings were shrinking and Second Lock was slowly going under. But making one last great effort, Tiger swam three or four yards more and felt for the bottom. The water was only waist high! Second Lock nearly burst with joy as he waded ashore.

"Wait a second," said Tiger, "while I go back for our things."

He plunged once more into the water. Presently he returned with his own clothes and Second Lock's shirt, which held both boys' clams.

Second Lock kept up well as they raced towards the village. He had forgotten the pain in his feet and his exhaustion. On and on they ran. Soon they passed the reef, now half submerged, and looking over his shoulder, Second Lock saw a huge white sheet of rolling water. The sea was catching up with them! Tiger told him that the current ran faster here than south of their home, some seven to eight li an hour. Even so, they managed to outrun it, to Second Lock's immense relief. And at last they were back in the village. A girl carrying two buckets to the well made a mocking sign at them.

"Aren't you ashamed to run about naked?" she asked. "You'd better hurry home. Your father's been looking for you everywhere."

At the next tree, Tiger helped Second Lock to untie his trousers, wring them out and hang them on a branch to dry. After scrambling into his own clothes he sat down gloomily on the grass, wondering how he could explain this business to his father. Second Lock, too, was far from happy. To the north, a vast expanse of water met his eyes. Shuddering involuntarily, he looked at Tiger. His cousin had changed completely in his eyes. What a wonderful fellow he was! Why had he never realized this before?

"Hey! You know something, Tiger?" he blurted out. "I like you ever so much. I really do. Let's be friends all our lives — what do you say?"

Tiger sat there without answering, gazing vaguely out to sea, frowning as he clasped his knees. After quite a long time he said:

"If my father asks you any questions when we get back, don't tell him everything, understand? Just say I was the one who took you to the estuary north of the village: it wasn't *your* idea. . . ."

Tiger stood up and took hold of Second Lock's hand, and both boys ran back towards the house.

# My Young Sister

## *Ren Daxing*

### I

My sister, Little Bud, was always being naughty. My Granny says I used to be very naughty, too, when I was little, but that my sister was even naughtier.

One day our teacher, Miss Fan of the sixth grade (I am in the sixth grade), told us that it was our duty to our country to study hard, because we won't be able to serve our country well when we grow up unless we do.

My sister is in the second grade — I mean, it was her second year at school. But she didn't know anything about studying hard. Directly school was over she used to begin skipping over a rope made of rubber bands tied together with her friend Little Feather who lived next door.

Today when I came home — I had been playing basket-ball in the school playground — there she was in the courtyard with Little Feather, skipping again, her face all red. When I told her to come in to do her homework she took no notice of me at all.

"You know it's our duty to study," I said. "You understand, don't you?" But she only wriggled and said "*ai-en, ai-en.*"

"What d'you mean, *ai-en, ai-en?*" I said. "Don't you want to serve your country when you grow up?" But she still only wriggled and went on making that silly noise.

I felt like snatching their rubber bands. But Little Bud took Little Feather by the hand, glaring at me, and ran off to skip outside in the road. I wanted to drag her back, but I knew it would only

make Granny say again, "You're the elder brother. You should reason with her when she's not behaving properly. Why must you quarrel?" But I didn't want to quarrel! Oh, if I had a hundred mouths I couldn't make it clear!

On top of things like this, my sister used to play truant. Look at what happened yesterday. Auntie came over early in the morning and brought us some apples and cakes. Sister ate two cakes and took the biggest apple. Then she began making faces. I knew what she was up to. She didn't mean to go to school.

I was really cross. I looked cross on purpose, and said, "You've had enough of those cakes, and you've got to come to school now."

Oh, she was silly! She wriggled in Auntie's arms and began saying "*ai-en, ai-en!*" again.

I went over to pull her down, and Granny began interfering again: "Auntie doesn't come very often," she said. "She can play with Auntie for a day. She's only a baby, after all!"

Baby, baby! As if being young made you always in the right! Granny was for ever taking her side.

I was afraid to go out to play ball the whole day at school. I didn't dare walk past the second grade class-room in case they asked me why Little Bud hadn't come to school. What should I have said? It would have been a lie to say that she was ill. But how could I have said that she was just playing truant?

Oh, I did wish that Daddy would come back from Fujian quickly! Why couldn't he be on a Hangzhou bus, and not on that long-distance route to Fujian! He's the only person Sister's afraid of. She certainly isn't afraid of me even though I am her elder brother. Oh no! Not in the least. And, as if that wasn't enough, Granny's always spoiling her.

That evening I said: "Let's do our homework together after supper. I'll help you do the difficult bits." She took absolutely no notice, but said:

"Tell me a story."

"I'm not going to!" I said, "we'll do our homework tonight, I tell you. And just you mind what I say."



But when I was getting her lesson books out of her satchel after supper, Shining Gem came to ask me to go for a bicycle ride with him. I'd been wanting to do this for ages, so I just told her, "I'm going out for a ride. You start your homework by yourself." Would she do it quietly? Oh no! She began crying and said: "I want to go too! I want to go too!"

"You? Why should you?" I said. "I told you to do your homework, and you'd better do it. I'm the elder brother, and younger brothers or sisters have to do what their elder brothers tell them."

"I shan't! I shan't! Anyway, why is it all right for you to go out and play, but not me?"

"You dare to talk to me like that! I'll be back in a minute anyhow," I said, determined to keep on top.

She started yelling for Granny. "Brother's going out to play and he won't take me!"

"Oh, Big Brother!" said Granny, putting her head out of the kitchen door. "Do for goodness' sake take her out! I'd be glad to have a little peace for a moment. Take her along, there's a good boy."

You see? Sister just treats me as a younger brother, not an elder. I have to listen to her. And she can always get Granny on her side.

It spoilt everything, having to take her along! I had to push her on the bicycle all the time. I hardly had a ride myself before it was quite dark. I made up my mind never to take her with me again.

## II

Today my sister got herself into trouble in school again. She had a fight with one of her classmates in the afternoon break.

They had stopped fighting when I got to them. The other girl was leaning against the wall crying, and my sister was standing by making an awful face. All the others were around and they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes. Before I could find out what had really happened the bell rang.

I was so upset that I couldn't concentrate in class at all. It was

geography, and when the teacher asked me questions I could only stand there like a fool. I hadn't even heard the questions. How could I answer them?

I felt myself getting redder and redder, and I can tell you I was even afraid I'd cry.

When I got home Granny saw at once that I was in a temper and asked me if I'd been quarrelling!

I didn't answer.

"What's upset you? Why can't you answer me when I speak to you?"

I was just boiling over, and all my temper came out on Granny.

"It's all your fault. You spoil her. You let her stay at home when I tell her to go to school. You tell her she can go out to play when I want her to do her homework. Today she had a fight at school and made me. . . ."

Granny was very taken aback when I flew out at her. She even trembled as she said:

"You shouldn't talk to me like that! Nobody's ever lectured me so in all my sixty years!"

"D'you think I'm afraid of you? Even if you were a hundred you'd have to be reasonable. You see if we don't have it out when Daddy comes back."

I shouted this and went out and banged the door behind me. I heard Sister begin to cry. I expect she was frightened by me quarrelling like that with Granny.

Fine! I thought. You're a bit afraid now. Do you good to get a bit of a fright! I decided that I'd go on quarrelling with Granny.

After Sister had gone to sleep that night Granny came over to my bed. She leaned down close and whispered.

"I know you want your sister to be a good girl, Big Brother. But I don't spoil her, really. You were both very little when you lost your mother, but she's only the baby still to me, even now, and of course you have to love babies more. Don't lose your temper with me again. She'll only copy you."

I couldn't understand. Granny has rights because she is older

and Sister has rights because she is younger. Everyone has rights except me, it seems!

I couldn't answer at the time. Next morning, when I was doing my geography homework, I heard Granny ask Sister to wash up the teacups. Sister said:

"No. I shan't."

I began to feel sorry about the way I'd behaved to Granny the night before, so I got up at once and said I would do it.

Then what do you think Sister said? "I don't want you to! Granny asked me to do it!" And up she climbed on a chair, and knelt there with the basin and things. But she was only messing about, not washing up. She began floating Granny's cup in the basin, shouting: "Look at the boat sailing on the West Lake!"

"Do it properly if you really want to wash up. Mind you don't break that cup," said Granny.

"Want to break it. Want to break it!" Sister began to say.

Granny didn't say anything, but just took the basin away from her. Sister scrambled down from the chair, and began stamping and yelling.

"Yah, yah! I'm not afraid of you! Yah! . . . Not afraid. Yah . . . even if you're a hundred years old. . . ."

I rushed over to her and put my hand over her mouth, quite frightened. There you are! I thought. Granny *was* right! My naughty sister copies me at once when I set her a bad example. I remembered another time when she'd done it, too, when she saw me ask Granny for thirty cents to pay for repairing Shining Gem's bicycle which I'd bent when I fell off it. Since then she'd kept on asking for money to buy sweets with. She used to demand enough to get sweets for Little L'cather too! That's the sort of person my little sister was!

### III

After our Pioneer squad meeting last Wednesday, Miss Yang, the second-grade teacher, came over to us.

"Have you finished your meeting?" she asked as she came in.

"Yes, Miss Yang. Please sit down, Miss Yang," we answered, getting up ourselves.

But she didn't sit down, just went straight on with what she'd come to say:

"Children, I want to have a talk with you. I've already talked it over with your instructor. And he agrees that. . . ."

"What is it? What is it?" we all asked.

"I'm going to ask one of you to work a bit harder at something." It was me she was looking at. "I'll help him if he wants me to, and I want you all to help too."

"What, me?" I asked.

"Yes. There's something I want you to do. It's to help your little sister to do her lessons better and not stay away from school, nor fight with her schoolmates. I want her to be a good child like you."

"I can't do it, Miss Yang. I can do other things, but I can't make my sister work at her lessons. She won't take any notice of what I say at all, so what can I do to help? She's not a bit afraid of me!"

"Afraid of you? Whatever do you mean?" asked our squad leader, Young Ben. "Has she got to be afraid of you before you can help her to do anything?"

"Of course!" I said.

"I don't think you're right," said Miss Yang. "I think she's got to respect you, not be afraid."

"Yes, Miss Yang," I said quickly. "She should respect me. But she doesn't look on me as her elder brother. She doesn't respect me in the least. She never takes any notice of what I say, really."

"Perhaps that's because you do wrong things, too," said Young Ben.

"I may do wrong things myself, but I'm not as bad as she is," I said. "Look at her! She hasn't the faintest idea what studying means. For instance, when I suggested I'd help her with her homework, what do you think she did? She wriggled in a terribly stupid way and just said '*ai-en, ai-en*'! She simply wouldn't take any notice of me, but went on with her silly skipping over rubber bands."

"What did you do, then?" asked Miss Yang, with a smile.

"I told her to stop skipping and come in and do her homework, and when she went on saying nothing but '*ai-en, ai-en*' I asked her, 'Didn't you understand what the teacher meant? She said it's our duty to study to help our country. If you don't study properly when you're young, you'll never be able to serve your country when you grow up!' But all she did was to run outside and skip! How can I help someone like that?"

D'you know what happened when I said that? They all burst out laughing.

"What have I said that's wrong, or so funny?" I asked.

"Nothing," answered Miss Yang. "You're a good student because you always remember why you should study properly. But it's no good just saying this to your little sister. She's only in the second grade, you know, and she hasn't been coming to school very long. Of course she can't understand things like that yet."

"D'you know what I think's the matter?" she went on. "I think your little sister's staying away from school because she hasn't done her homework, so she's afraid of lessons. That's why she doesn't want to come. She's doing more difficult lessons now she's in the second grade — more difficult than when she was in the first. And if she doesn't work hard to begin with, it will be more and more difficult later on. I must try to give her more help myself, and you should help at home, too. Try not to be too impatient. See if you can get her interested in studying. And don't forget that you are her example in everything you do, both in everyday things and lessons. That's where the respect comes in. Young Ben was right. Try to remember whether you haven't yourself set a bad example sometimes which made her copy you. Maybe she doesn't respect you, or listen to you when you were right, because of that."

"Well, yes, I do sometimes," I said, after I'd thought for a moment. "I remember once when I said I'd help her with her homework, Shining Gem came to ask me to go for a bicycle ride, so I went off and told her to do it by herself. But she wouldn't. . . ."

"There you are!" said Young Ben.

That made me rather cross. "What d'you mean by that?" I said. "That's not the only thing! I lost my temper with Granny one day. Next day my sister began to talk rudely to her."

"There you are!" said Young Ben again.

"I don't need you to tell me! But I'll promise now to help her. At least, I'll try, but I hope Miss Yang and all of you will help, too."

## IV

Next Sunday morning Sister said: "I want to go to the West Lake, Brother. You take me."

"I won't," I said. "We should study today. We'll study together. Even if Shining Gem comes I won't go out for a bicycle ride. We'll study all day, and you can prepare all your lessons."

Granny gave me a look, with a smile as if she didn't believe me.

"It's my duty to do this, you know," I whispered to Granny, while Sister was washing her face. "I promised Miss Yang I'd help. Don't stop us, please."

"But you don't have to study all day!" said Granny.

"You don't understand, Granny. The reason she stays away from school is because she hasn't done her homework properly, and that makes her afraid that the teacher will ask her questions. If she prepares all her lessons, she'll like going to school."

After breakfast I fetched three buckets of water from the well in the courtyard for Granny. Then I suddenly discovered that Sister had disappeared! Granny said she had asked her for three cents to buy roasted sweet potatoes.

I sat down and went over her lesson books so that I should be prepared to help her. But even when I waited a long time she never came back. I went out to the old man at the sweet potato stall. He was quite alone — there wasn't even the shadow of my sister in sight. I bet she's playing with Little Feather again, I thought, so I went over to Little Feather's, and asked her mother, who was doing the washing in the courtyard, whether she had seen her.

"She was here with my Little Feather a little while ago," said she. "I expect they're skipping outside."

"No, I can't see either of them anywhere."

She shook the soap-suds off her hands, and came out with me to have a look herself. When we'd looked everywhere, and still saw no trace of them, I suddenly remembered what Sister had said that morning.

"They must have gone to the West Lake!" I cried.

Both Granny and Little Feather's mother grew anxious, and told me to go and look for them at once. I was worried myself, and started off before Granny had finished telling me what I should do. But the West Lake is so big! Where should I begin to look for them? I ran about, and looked and looked, and called for them. I had almost lost my voice with calling when I got to the Riverside Park. And, as bad luck would have it, it began to rain, first a drizzle, and then a proper downpour. I ran all over the park and got soaked to the skin. I went on to the West Lake, all misty in the rain, but I never found them. Then I went on to the wet road. All the passers-by, in their raincoats or under their umbrellas, looked at me curiously, but nobody could tell me where my little sister was.

I began to cry. I couldn't help it.

I never did find them, but Little Feather's mother came to look for me and told me that my sister and Little Feather had been brought back by a policeman. They had been playing by the West Lake and had got lost. When it started to rain they began to cry. Then a policeman came up, and took them home.

I ran home and found Sister sitting silently in a corner, her eyes all swollen from crying. Granny had changed her wet clothes, but her hair was still damp.

At first I wanted to say, "See? Serves you right!" But somehow I didn't; I was sorry for her. So what I said was, "Back, I see! All right! We'll study this afternoon. Half a day is better than none."

Her mouth went sulky and her nose twitched the way it does when she is going to cry.

"There you go again, Big Brother," Granny complained. "You

don't have to study all day, nor even half a day. . . . Why must you be always on at her? You go and change your clothes. If you catch cold it'll be I who have to worry."

H'm, so now telling her to study was being "always on" at her! I felt angry, but I didn't answer Granny back, remembering what Miss Yang and Young Ben had said. I just went and changed my clothes.

Next day Sister was ill and couldn't go to school.

Directly I got to school myself I went straight to Young Ben and told him what had happened on Sunday.

"You see? I didn't go out for a bicycle ride nor quarrel with Granny, but still my little sister wouldn't take any notice of what I said, nor would she study."

"Well, she does seem to be difficult," he said, after thinking a minute. "Let's go and tell Miss Yang."

When we found her I told her that my sister had not come to school because she had a little cold which would be better after a day's rest. Then I told her everything that had happened the day before.

"I didn't go for a bicycle ride, nor did I quarrel with Granny," I said, all over again. "But just the same, she wouldn't listen to me, nor would she study."

"Look, Miss Yang. His sister's really very difficult."

"You are a good boy," she said, and patted my shoulder. "But didn't I say you shouldn't try to go too fast? Sunday's a holiday, you know! You can't ask her to study the whole day! Of course you'll frighten her if you ask her to do as much as that."

"What should I have done?"

"Help her little by little. On Sundays, study with her for a little while, and then take her out to play. You can't ask her suddenly to prepare all her lessons at once and be a model overnight. I'll come round to see her this evening."

Miss Yang did come that evening to see how my sister was. She put her hand on Sister's forehead, and wouldn't let her sit up.

"I don't think you've got any fever now," she said. "You'll be all right."



Sister was shy, but she smiled at Miss Yang, and said: "I'll go to school tomorrow. . . ."

"That's right. But remember, Little Bud, you mustn't go to the West Lake by yourself another time. Ask your big brother to take you."

"He won't."

"Won't he? I think he will. You'll see. He'll take you there next Sunday."

Miss Yang talked to Granny for a long time, and asked her what she thought about Sister, and whether she was a good girl at home. She also praised me in front of both of them, and said I was doing very well at school.

## V

Next Sunday came round. Young Ben had asked several of us to go to Zhongshan Park. This time I took my little sister along.

"Big Brother! Why do you bring your tail with you?" called out Shining Gem.

"Shut up, you," I said to him, softly. "She's not a tail. She's my sister!"

"You've forgotten, Shining Gem," said Young Ben, "it's his duty to do this, and it's ours, too."

Shining Gem shut up immediately.

We had a very good time. I felt specially happy, because I was not only enjoying myself, but was also helping my sister.

My sister liked it too. She'd never been to Zhongshan Park before; I'd always thought she'd be a nuisance, so I wouldn't take her along. She looked at everything, played at having dinner at a stone bench and table in one of the pavilions, and ran up and down on the grass as happy as a little bird who had just begun to fly.

All my schoolmates liked her, and played with her on the grass. Shining Gem made his rabbit face to make her laugh. As we were in a strange place, and Granny wasn't there, she kept close to me and

held my hand tight as we walked around, and leaned against me when we sat down.

There were several soldiers of our Liberation Army sitting under a big tree. We asked them to tell us some stories of their life, and listened, all ears. Even my sister was as quiet as could be. If they spoke directly to her she looked at me first, always, before she answered.

"What a quiet little girl she is!" one of them said. "I'm sure she works very hard at school." Then he asked her, "Which grade are you in?"

She looked at me first, and then said: "Second grade." "Does your teacher think you're a good girl?" he asked.

She looked at me again, and didn't answer straight away, then she said: "No."

"Why not?" asked the soldier, with a grin.

This time my sister didn't answer at all, but hid behind me.

"She doesn't study very hard, and sometimes she stays away from school," I answered for her.

"Well, I'm sure the teacher likes her," said the soldier. "But if she studied better the teacher would be even nicer to her."

As we were going home, Young Ben said to my sister, "See? Your soldier uncle wants us to study hard. If you stay away from school, he'll be very sorry to hear about it."

Sister didn't answer, but she wriggled. I guessed she must be feeling ashamed at last.

I began to think she wasn't really as naughty as I thought. She would take notice if I found out how to manage her.

## VI

I told Miss Yang about our trip to Zhongshan Park.

"That's right. Try playing with her more, and not nagging her," she said. "You'll soon find that she'll begin to trust you and do what you tell her; you'll be a proper big brother then."

"D'you think I should go on telling her stories?" I asked. "She loves listening to stories. But I couldn't be bothered to do it before. It's a lot of trouble."

"That's a good idea! Yes, tell her stories," Miss Yang said. "She won't want to run out in the street so often then."

One day after that I saw that Sister was gobbling up her supper at top speed. It was very hot soup, too, but she didn't seem to mind burning her lips. I looked round and saw Little Feather was peeping through the window.

"Little Feather, Little Bud is going to do her homework tonight," I said. "You'll have to play by yourself."

Little Bud was at her old tricks again. She wriggled and said: "*Ai-en, ai-en.*"

"I'm going to tell stories to Granny," I said, when I saw what was up. "Lovely stories they are, too! About our People's Volunteers."

She made a face, as though she didn't believe a word of it.

"I am, really," I said. "You'll see, directly after supper."

And sure enough, I began right after supper. Little Bud didn't go out to play, but Little Feather came in to listen. I'd heard three of the stories from our instructor, and I got one from our Pioneer newspaper. I told one after the other until it was bed time.

Next day I went over to the second-grade classroom at break to see if Sister was quarrelling again. As soon as I got to the corridor of her classroom I saw her, with a crowd round her. There she was, waving her hands and telling them my stories! And the classmate she'd hit before was there listening.

I couldn't help laughing.

After supper that evening Sister asked for more stories. First of all I thought I'd agree, then I thought better of it: "I will when I've finished my homework," I said. "If I don't do my homework I shan't know what to say if I get questioned on it tomorrow."

Little Sister didn't say anything.

"What about you?" I asked. "Haven't you got any homework?"

"Yes. We've got some new characters to learn and an arithmetic exercise."

"Well, we'd better do our homework first," I said. "I'll tell you some stories afterwards." I didn't wait for her to agree, but got her arithmetic book out, and told her to sit beside me.

Between you and me, second-grade arithmetic isn't arithmetic at all. It was just adding and taking away that you could do in your head! The first one was: "There are seven white butterflies, and seven red ones. How many is that altogether?" Of course I knew the answer was fourteen without thinking. The next one was: "Seven of the fourteen butterflies flew away. How many are left?" Of course I knew the answer at once. Seven! I couldn't understand why she should be afraid of such simple problems. I wouldn't mind having to solve a hundred such problems a day.

Anyway I began by asking her the first one.

She put a "7" down, and put another one underneath. Then she drew a line under them. Then she wrote a plus sign. After that she got stuck, and began to chew her pencil and stare into space.

"Don't bite your pencil," I said. "How many does that make altogether?"

She looked at me, and began counting on her fingers. After a long time she wrote "14" under the line.

"That's right!" I said. "Now for the next one. Seven butterflies flew away from the fourteen. How many are left?"

She looked at me again, and wrote it all down with a minus sign this time. Then she began counting on her fingers. After a long time she put down "8" under the line. I began to feel impatient, but I kept my temper.

"Auntie had fourteen apples and gave you seven. How many did she have left?" I asked.

She looked at me, rubbed the "8" out and put down a "6".

I was really angry now. But I managed to keep my temper. "Oh, you silly! Put a '7' down, can't you! There are seven left, of course."

She seemed to get angry too. "When did Auntie give me seven apples?" She muttered, hanging her head. She rubbed out the "6" and made a hole in the paper.

"*Ai-en, ai-en.* Look. . . ." I saw that her eyes were full of tears,

and that she was just about to cry.

I wanted to stop this, so I hastily wrote down a "7" for her and said, "All right, all right! That's enough arithmetic. You do your new characters now and I'll do my homework."

We both finished quite quickly. Sister had practised her characters. She had written the right strokes, but did them very badly.

Then I told her a story. Then Sister wanted to tell me one. She told me the one about the rabbits who wouldn't let the wolf into their house — Miss Yang had told it them. When Granny had done the washing up she told us one. We were all happy that night.

## VII

Since then, we often tell stories or sing, or I take Sister round to Shining Gem's to play. Sometimes I read while she skips with Little Feather. But we always finish our homework first before we tell stories or play. Sometimes I show her how to do her work, if she can't manage. The homework is so easy for me it doesn't take any time.

Young Ben and Shining Gem and some of my other friends come to see us very often. They tell her stories, too. And I always take her with us if Shining Gem asks me to go for a bicycle ride. Young Ben gave her two picture books which his aunt had given to his little brother when he was in the second grade. He's in the third grade now and doesn't want them any more.

One day when Young Ben came round he said: "We're going to Zhongshan Park again soon, Little Bud. Mind you do your homework well, or you won't know what to say when the Liberation Army uncles ask again."

The others didn't stay very long when they came. When we said it was time for us to do our homework, they used to go home to do theirs.

One evening Miss Yang came in while I was playing cat-and-mouse with Sister. When Sister saw her she ran over to take her hand.

"Playing games? That's nice," said Miss Yang, smiling.

"I've done my homework, Miss Yang," said Sister.

"You're doing ever so much better," Miss Yang said.

Granny came out to talk to her.

"Let me see tonight's homework, Little Bud," said Miss Yang after a bit. "I'd like to see how you've done it."

Sister, feeling very proud, ran to get her arithmetic book, and gave it to Miss Yang. She looked it over, and nodded.

"It's very good. You've got them all right," she said. "Why couldn't you do them on the blackboard today?"

Sister hung her head, and went red.

Miss Yang pulled Sister to her, and spoke very kindly: "There's nothing to be afraid of. Just say why you couldn't do it on the blackboard."

Sister buried her head against Miss Yang's shoulder and said so quietly you could barely hear the words, "I had to do it all by myself on the blackboard, but Brother shows me how to do it when I do it at home."

"Oh, so that's how it is, is it? Now I see. Let's have a look at your arithmetic book again. I'll explain the things you don't understand."

And she began to explain them to her. I stood beside them listening. Miss Yang did it ever so well, so clearly and understandably. Sister listened and nodded, all smiles. Then Miss Yang played with us for a bit before she went home.

I saw her to the door. "Don't do her work for her any more," she said softly to me.

"All right!" I answered.

Next evening Sister wanted to do her homework by herself and didn't want to sit beside me. When I walked over she pushed me away shyly.

"No! No! — I want to do it myself. Miss Yang told me to."

It took her much longer. She counted the fingers on her left hand with her right hand, and then her right hand fingers with her left. At

last she finished. Of the four arithmetic problems only one was wrong.

I read this one to her and explained it to her. She still couldn't make it out. But instead of telling her the answer, I told her to ask Miss Yang about it next day.

## VIII

The next Saturday I was talking to Shining Gem at break when I saw my sister running over, her face red with excitement. She was holding her arithmetic book which she pushed at me, nearly into my face. It was marked with full marks — a red “5”.

“Miss Yang gave me 5! Miss Yang gave me 5!” she shouted.

When we got home Granny had to see it at once. She let us go to the pictures that night to celebrate Sister's 5.

It was the first time that I'd ever been to the pictures with my sister. I wouldn't take her before because I was afraid that she would bother me all the time with endless questions. But now it was different. Now I asked her all the time if she understood.

Whenever a new person came on the screen she asked me if it was a good person or a bad one, even in the advertisement slides, and I had to tell her the story of the long film. I did it all very quietly so as not to disturb the other people.

Now I know that she likes stories and pictures just as much as I do.

One day it was our squad's job to make friends with the second-grade pupils and join them in their games.

First they did a dance for us and then we sang for them and did physical exercises — they aren't very good at their exercises, so we showed them how.

While we were performing, I saw that my sister was watching me.

After the performance Miss Yang spoke: “I've got some good news for you, children,” she said. “Our school's organizing a party and the second-grade pupils are going to perform at it. Don't you

think that's a good idea?"

"Yes!" they all shouted.

"We'll do a dance. We'll choose sixteen of you for it — people who dance well, and who are good at lessons. Do you agree?"

"Yes!"

Miss Yang began to choose them, one by one, and each time asked the class if they agreed. The first, second, up to the eighth, were all suggested by Miss Yang and passed by everybody.

I could see that Sister was beginning to feel worried. She was staring at Miss Yang, hoping that her name would be the next one. But it wasn't. They'd chosen up to thirteen. I was worried too — I wanted my sister to be chosen.

She was the fourteenth to be called out! "Little Bud! Everyone agree?"

Only a few called out, "Yes!"

One boy in a red sweater said: "No! Little Bud fought with one of us once."

"She stayed away from school, too," said another boy.

"What do you say?" Miss Yang asked, looking at Little Bud.

Sister didn't answer but hung her head, all red, and then looked up again.

"She doesn't fight now, or stay home from school," shouted three or four people. "And she got a 5 in arithmetic!"

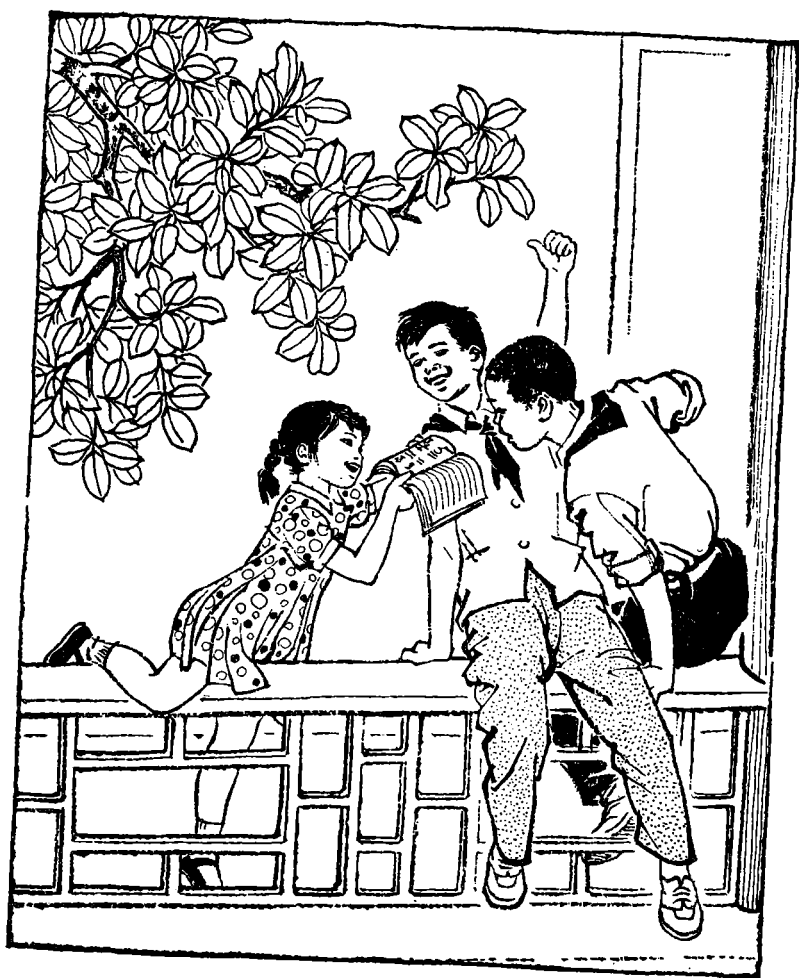
"All right, children!" said Miss Yang. "It's true that Little Bud did have a fight, and that she stayed away from school and didn't study properly. But she has improved now. She is kind to her schoolmates, she comes to school every day, and she's working ever so much better. So I think she should be chosen. What do you say?"

"Yes!" they all chorused.

Sister has hurried *me* to school every day since she has had the rehearsals to do. And as soon as she finishes her homework in the evening she practises the steps. She dances for Granny and me and Little Feather.

"I'm going to dance in the party at school," she told Little Feather.







So she taught Little Feather how to dance, and showed her her lesson books too.

"This is my arithmetic book. This is writing. It's lovely at school. I've got lots of friends all about my age. We study and dance and play together. And there is Miss Yang. . . ."

"I want to go to school too. I want to go to school with you," Little Feather began clamouring before she'd finished.

"You ask your mother to let you come to our school next year," I said.

Miss Yang told all about me and my sister at our Pioneer meeting on Saturday afternoon. And our instructor said it was an example for everybody.

I felt shy. "It's because of Miss Yang, not me," I said, standing up. "I only took her out to play and told her stories and did her homework with her. And the others here helped too. . . ."

"There you are!" said Young Ben loudly. "What you've just said is an example for us. You're not a teacher, so what can you do? Lots of us don't even do that. There are some boys who think their little brothers and sisters are tails. . . ."

Everybody laughed.

"What's there to laugh about?" said Young Ben angrily. "How can a Young Pioneer help anybody if he doesn't begin at home?"

# Little Rong and Me

*Liu Zhen*

## I. The Marvellous Creature

The comrades call me "Light Machine-gun". That's because I like to talk a lot and my voice is high and sharp.

One night in June 1942, Zhao, our section chief, helped me tie my dispatch bag on good and tight and, as usual, I started off for one of our secret message relay stations in enemy territory.

June weather is screwy. A minute before the sky was full of winking stars. Then, all of a sudden, a big wind rose, and black clouds raced overhead like half-tamed horses that had slipped their halters. A howling gale drove against me for all it was worth. I took a deep whiff of that icy air and every inch of me puckered into goose-pimples. But I planted my feet firmly on the ground and puffed up my chest.

"What about it?" I said to the wind. "Think you can push me around because I'm only fifteen? Well, think again. I'm a veteran — three years in the Eighth Route Army. The planes and big guns of the Japanese invaders don't scare me. Is small stuff like you going to do it? Huh!"

I struck out with long strides, but that wind was tough. It just pushed at me all the harder. I made a little head-way. It pressed me back. But I wouldn't give in. I wasn't going to let it beat me.

Panting, I leaned into the wind and ground my way forward. I don't know how long I kept going like that. Finally, I raised my head and looked at the sky. The black clouds had joined together to make a solid endless curtain. The Milky Way, the Big Dipper, the whole

sky was covered. My heart skipped a beat. Heavens! With no stars how could I get my bearings? I was lost.

The Japanese had built tower forts all over the place. At night their searchlights gleamed like ogres' eyes. The lights kept sweeping across my path. They seemed to be looking for my dispatch bag. I pulled it around from my back to my chest, fast, and hugged it tight. Aiya! Which way should I go?

Before I had set out that night, Zhao, our section chief, had been a little worried. "Young Wang," he had said to me in a low voice, "be careful, whatever you do! This is a very important document and it has to be delivered before dawn. You've a long way to go. Do you think you can make it?"

I got a little mad. "A small paper like that. I could deliver it with my eyes shut."

Zhao reached for my dispatch bag. "I can't trust you. You're much too cocky. Something's sure to go wrong. I'll find someone else. . . ."

Hastily, I stopped him. "I shouldn't have talked like that," I apologized. "Anyhow, I was only kidding. That isn't what I think at all."

He gave the bag on my back a poke and shoved something into my hand bound in a handkerchief. "Get going."

Outside the courtyard gate, I untied the handkerchief. In it were four hard-boiled eggs. Hah. I remembered. His wife had brought them from home yesterday. I could almost smell their fragrance through the shell. Really.

I felt right on top of the world then, but now I had to run into weather like this. Of all the rotten luck. The night was black as pitch. One mis-step and the enemy would nab me. And the document was very important. What to do? I wanted to stick on a pair of wings and grab a broom and fly into the sky. I could sweep those black clouds away and put a nice bright moon right up there in the middle. I thought about the sun too, that big red fiery ball. If only I could drag it back from the other side of the earth.

As these crazy ideas were whirling through my brain, suddenly,

not far off to the left, I saw a tiny light flickering. If that's a man, I thought, he's sure not to be an enemy. When it gets dark, the enemy pull their head in like a turtle. They don't dare come out of their towers at night.

Pleased, I hurried towards the light. Before long, I reached a grove of old pine trees. The light disappeared. I was nearly frantic. Then, from somewhere behind me, a low voice said sharply:

"What are you up to?"

I gave a startled leap but quickly got hold of myself. "My Ma's sick," I said coolly. "I'm on my way home with some medicine I bought for her in the city. But I've lost the road. Can you tell me where it is?"

The shadowy figure of a man walked up to me, took my head in his hands and shook it from side to side. "Ha, ha, ha," he laughed. "Just an innocent peasant, eh? Don't kid me."

From the sound of his voice, I could tell he wasn't a bad man. The moon came through a rift in the clouds just then, and I was able to get a good look at him. He was a white-bearded old man carrying a tattered sack on his back.

"Speak up, quickly," he said. "Are you a comrade or not?"

"I'm a comrade," I said, and buried my head against his chest. For some reason I felt very upset that he had been suspicious of me.

Fondly, he raised my head. "Is there anything I can do for you? Just give the order, my little commander."

"I have to get to Dawang Village in a hurry," I told him promptly. "Can you take me there?"

"Nothing to it," he replied airily. "I've got winged feet and eyes that can see a thousand miles. I can take you right up to heaven if need be."

"Good. Let's hurry then."

He smartly drew himself up like a soldier. "Attention. Salute. Forward — march."

I giggled and took a tight grip on his hand.

Although he was old, he walked with his chest high, and he had more spirit than a man half his age. With him as my guide, the dark-

ness and the wind didn't dare to pick on me any more.

It seemed kind of queer. How did he happen to pop up just when I needed him? He was like one of those Marvellous Creatures in Grandma's stories that could summon the wind and the rain, and ride around on a cloud. His beard was a foot long, like the beard the Sun Grandfather hangs through the clouds at sunset.

"What are you looking at me for?" he said with a flip of his hand. "I'm not your blushing bride. Keep your eyes on the ground or you're liable to trip and raise a lump on your noggin."

I had to tell him. "Old Grandpa, if I hadn't learned in the Eighth Route Army that superstition is a fake, I'd swear you were a Marvellous Creature."

He laughed. "A Marvellous Creature, eh? Nothing very special about them. I've got them beat a mile. I can knock off Japanese invaders. In that line there's nobody better than me."

Before I knew it, we reached the outskirts of a village. He gave me another salute.

"Reporting to the commander. Mission completed. Can I go now?"

Sure enough, it was Dawang. But I hated to part with him. I quickly blocked his path and pleaded:

"Please trust me, Old Grandpa. Tell me what you do. What's your name? Where do you live?"

He put his mouth close to my ear. "I do trust you, dear child. I'm a contact man in enemy territory. My family name is Sun. No need to ask my given name. Call me Grandpa Sun, if it suits you, or if it doesn't, Sun the Monkey King!\* Don't call me Pigsy,\*\* that's all. He was woman crazy, and how can I get sweet on a girl at my age? Even if I went sweet on her, she wouldn't go for me. No, it's better to be sweet on fighting the Japanese. That's a darling of a job. It doesn't care how old I am."

He began walking away with large strides. I ran in front of him.

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\*Both are supernatural characters in the popular classical novel *Journey to the West*.

"You needn't think you're such a secret fellow. Even if you go to the ends of the earth, I'll be able to find you again."

## II. Little Rong, a Girl of Twelve

By then it was already about two in the morning, but still before the first cock's crow. Everyone was fast asleep. The only sound was the rustling of the white poplar leaves, like a kind-hearted aunt softly whispering a long, long story without ever pausing for breath. Somewhere a baby began to cry, then, probably finding the nipple again, went back to sleep. A man's snores rumbled like thunder. I suddenly had the feeling that I was the hardest worker in the world, that no one's job was as interesting as mine. There had been many nights like this when I walked all alone through a silent village. Softly I walked, while millions of people slept. I talked to the moon and the stars. I saw owls. I saw flocks of migrating geese sleeping exhausted on the banks of a river. So as not to waken them, I stole past in a wide circle, just itching to grab one and take it home under my jacket. But I remembered Grandma saying that geese can only live in pairs. If one is lost, its mate never rests, but stands guard while the other geese sleep. It's very sad. Rather than harm a pair like that, I'd give up hunting for the rest of my life.

With these thoughts milling through my mind, I soon approached Aunt Li's gate. Her house was one of our message relay stations. It stood in a small compound on a hill at the east end of the village, quite far from the other houses. Outside the compound gate was a huge locust tree with a hollow trunk. Beside the tree was a well with clear sweet water. Aunt Li often sat beneath that tree, washing clothes for the comrades hidden in her house and acting as look-out at the same time. It didn't matter how bad the weather was, or how late at night, whenever any of our people stopped by, Aunt Li and her husband would get up and cook them something to eat and bustle around as if the comrade was one of the family. As soon as I saw that com-



pound gate, my legs went soft. I wanted to stretch out on their brick oven-bed and sleep for two days solid.

There were three in the family. The third was Little Rong, a girl about twelve, their only child. Little Rong is a swell girl, but she's kind of bossy. Usually, when I showed up, tired from the long walk, she'd heat me some water and say:

"Don't be such a dawdling slow-poke. Hurry and soak your feet. After you've finished washing, you can eat."

And another thing — she doesn't like to talk. You can't blame her for that. After all, everybody's got his own nature. It's nothing anyone can control. But she seems set on controlling mine. She won't let me say much.

"You don't have to keep gabbing," she tells me. "No one would ever mistake you for a dumb mute."

You'd think she was scared my voice would deafen her, or something. Really queer, that girl. Well, I had come again. I'd see how she'd treat me this time.

I gave three kicks to the back wall of their compound — the agreed signal. In the past, someone would answer with a cough, and softly open the gate. The gate was kept well oiled, and made no sound. But now, even after I gave the signal four times, there wasn't the slightest stir inside. Were they all sleeping too deeply? That had never happened before. I stole to the compound gate, took out a piece of wire I carried around for lifting latches, and prepared to slip it through the crack between the gate and the post. Oh mama mine! Not a chance. The space was sealed with three strips of heavy paper. I began to sweat. What had happened? Where had the three of them gone to? What was I going to do? This was enemy territory, only a few miles from the Beijing-Hankou Railway. The document was supposed to be passed on to a relay station on the western side of the line. I had never made the trip and didn't know the way. Should I bring the message back? Nearly twenty-five miles. Not only would I be falling down on my job, but I'd also have to travel part of the way in daylight. The enemy might catch me and get their hands on that important document.

I was worried and mad too. Ripping off the paper strips, I forced the gate. A little dog yapped twice and crawled out from his hiding place. When he saw it was me, he stopped barking. It was Little Rong's Pekinese. I was really glad to see him. I snatched him up and hugged him and kissed his small black nose.

"Little Treasure, tell me. Where's Aunt and Uncle and Little Rong?" As I spoke, tears came to my eyes.

Suddenly a dark thing rushed towards me from the hollow locust tree and scared me so I fell back two paces. But I cooled right down and pulled out the dummy pistol I had stuck in my belt.

"Who are you?" I said in a low voice.

The figure didn't move, but cried softly, "Dear Young Wang. . . ."

"Little Rong?" My heart grew tight. Her voice had quavered so. I walked up to her with dragging steps. "What were you doing out there?" I asked cautiously. "Where's Aunt and Uncle?"

She grasped my hand. "There are traitors in this village. We can't talk here."

Hand in hand, we flew to the willow tree on the outskirts of the village, the little Peke racing behind us, his tail poked up in the air. It was beneath this tree that I had parted company with Grandpa Sun.

"Why have you come?" asked Little Rong. "Tell me, quick."

"No. Calm down. Where's Aunt and Uncle?"

"Don't ask. Tell me why you've come."

"I will ask. I want to know."

"I'm not going to let you ask." Little Rong wept.

My heart sank. I couldn't say anything. After a long while, I finally asked:

"What are we going to do about the document? Our section chief says it has to be passed on to the relay station on the west side of the railway right away."

Little Rong immediately stopped crying. "That's just what I've been waiting for. Give it to me." She reached for my dispatch bag.

I grabbed her hand. "Nothing doing. You won't be able to get through."

"Have you forgotten?" she said patiently, though I could see she was trying hard to hold herself in check. "I've been to that relay station a dozen times."

"But you went with your father then."

"I've delivered notes alone too."

"A note is much easier. If you run into the enemy you can swallow it down in one gulp. You can't do that with a big document."

"If I say I can deliver it, then I can. Don't stand here arguing with me all day."

I refused to be flurried. Counting on my fingers, I said, "You're twelve years old. Twelve, is that right? I won't let you do it. When I was twelve, though I joined the army, I was still afraid of ghosts on the road at night."

"Just because a person's twelve doesn't mean she can't do anything useful," Little Rong insisted stubbornly.

I shook my head. "That document is too important."

"Last week my aunt brought me five persimmons, and I've been saving them ever since, waiting for you to come so that we could eat them together," Little Rong said reproachfully. "But you, you're a fine one. You think I'm good for nothing." She punched me in the chest with her small fist and burst into heart-broken sobs.

What I said couldn't have made her cry like that. From the sound of it, she was crying for her mother and father. Though I didn't know exactly what had happened to them, tears began to roll from my eyes, and I wept with her. The Peke seemed to be grief-stricken too. He kept running from one of us to the other, first looking up at her, then looking up at me.

In the distance a cock crowed. Little Rong and I immediately became as quiet as if we had never been crying. We stared at each other in alarm. "It's nearly dawn. What about the document?" We both said almost in one breath.

Little Rong frantically grabbed my lapel. "I tell you I surely can deliver it. You can cut off my head if I don't. Not another word

out of you now."

I thought carefully. We couldn't afford to wait any longer. "Let's go together," I said. "Two minds are always better than one."

Little Rong smiled broadly. "Good. Let's hurry." Again she reached for my dispatch bag.

"You don't have to carry it," I told her.

"You've come twenty-five miles against a strong wind. You must be worn out. You only talk tough."

"But — "

"How you love to chatter. I hate you." And with no further ado, she angrily yanked off my dispatch bag and tied it on her own back. Then she turned around and buttoned my jacket.

"The dawn mist is going to settle soon," she said. From her pocket she fished out two sorghum cakes, both as hard as a rock, and handed them to me.

She was always like that. Because her father and mother were often away delivering messages, she became the mistress of the house. Little Rong could cook and sew, and she looked after everyone just like an adult. The comrades who used to stop over at her place called her "Little Grown-up". But whenever I was around, she seemed to turn into a "Big Grown-up". She petted me and at the same time insisted on making me behave.

Whenever she treated me like that, no matter how mad I might be at her, I'd forget it all in a minute. It was as if I had become her obedient kid brother.

"The way Little Rong manages Young Wang," her mother used to marvel proudly. "Well, every creature in nature has its master."

I don't know why things were that way between us. But the more Little Rong bossed me, the better I liked her.

### III. "I Can Take Care of Myself"

It was already turning light in the east as we neared the railway. A train was chugging north. Little Rong and me sat down beneath





some hemp stalks and watched it go past. It looked like a lot of small houses all strung together, longer than our village. Aiya, that train was really something. It could carry hundreds and thousands of people and piles and mountains of freight.

"Really fine," I said to myself. "I was figuring on driving a truck after we've won the war, but now I've changed my mind. I'm going to be a locomotive driver. Then whenever I see any comrades tired out from marching, I'll stop and say: 'Climb on, fellows. This train belongs to us. . .'"

Little Rong's large black eyes shone like stars. She was smiling but not making a sound. Was she thinking of driving a locomotive too?

After the train passed, we jumped to our feet. "Don't do anything unless I give the order," Little Rong said in a hoarse voice, handing me the dispatch bag. Crouching, she ran towards the railway.

She had explained the set-up very clearly while we were traveling. She said the Japanese had a railway protection detachment. It was always patrolling. Sometimes, it hid on both sides of the line, and watched. Little Rong had said that she would go first. If she ran into the enemy patrol, she would call out, and I could circle past them. If she didn't see any enemy, she would come back for me. I didn't agree, and we argued for a long time. I said I had been in the Eighth Route Army for three years. I had battle experience. I should be the one to go first. She said that, with my thick Shandong accent, if I met the enemy they'd know I wasn't from these parts the minute I opened my mouth. Besides, she said, I was a boy, with long legs. My job should be to carry the message and run fast. Scouting, giving orders, and covering up should be her work. What she said made sense. I had to give in.

Now I waited for her on pins and needles. My heart was pounding like mad and I kept my ears cocked for any sound of danger. Maybe the enemy had nabbed her. But she had said that even if she should be caught she would speak very loud to make sure I could hear her.

"Please don't let there be any talking," I muttered. "Hurry back, Little Rong. She will, she must come back. . ."

Hey! Sure enough, a small dark figure came dashing towards me. . . .

Even before she reached me, Little Rong was motioning with her hand. "Quick. Come with me," she hissed.

I ran behind her, wishing we could fly to the other side of the railway in one jump. In the middle of the tracks, she suddenly halted and stood straight as a rod. She flung out her arm like a commander on the battlefield.

"Quick, quick. This way. Due west."

Seeing her so cool steadied me fifty per cent right away. I ran with all my might till I got to the western side of the railway, then slowed down. A few seconds later, she caught up with me. Ping, ping! — a rifle cracked behind us. Crouching, hand in hand, we ran at full speed. In a village ahead of us to the northwest, more rifles began popping too. Little Rong laughed.

"Those are our guerrillas. They always try to protect comrades crossing the line."

After a while, the firing stopped. Little Rong was running with her mouth open, gasping for breath. Now she slackened her pace.

"It's all right here," she said.

We walked a little longer and it was daylight. The bird that always sings earliest on summer mornings burst into song. Little Rong and me love that bird the best. We don't know his name. We just call him "Dawn Bird".

The sun, a big fiery red ball behind us, climbed the far eastern horizon. It made us cast long, long shadows, which were bigger than the tallest man alive. Little Rong took huge strides, trying in vain to step on her own shadow.

When we reached the village we were looking for, everyone was eating breakfast. Little Rong seemed very familiar with the place. She led me to a small courtyard where a woman about fifty came out of the northern wing to welcome us.

"Child," she said reproachfully to Little Rong, "why have you come alone? Your father can't be *that* busy."

Tears sprang to Little Rong's eyes, but she clamped her small



mouth shut tight and didn't say a word. She led me to sit down on the brick oven-bed, just as if this were her own home. Then she helped the woman bring in firewood and light the cooking stove.

Our hostess didn't stand on ceremony. She spread some quilts on the bed, helped me pull off my shoes, and carefully took my dispatch bag.

"There's a very important document in there," I told her. "It mustn't be delayed. Send it right on."

"I know," she said with a smile. "I know all about it."

I was glad she didn't treat me like a child, but spoke to me as one comrade to another. Without waiting for me to ask, she introduced herself.

"My family's name is Zhang. Every one of us earns his keep. My son's in the guerrillas. The old man delivers messages in the relay station. The daughter-in-law and me look after the comrades who pass through. My six-year-old grandson is our orderly. He's learned how to serve the comrades drinking water and lay out chopsticks on the table. He's crazy about his job." She laughed heartily.

But when I looked at Little Rong, I couldn't speak. Zhao, our section chief, said sometimes when he teased me: "The Light Machine-gun is jammed." That's just how I felt then.

Mrs. Zhang kept her eyes on feeding the fire. "A long trip like that and your father lets you come without him. He's a cool one. He had a sore on his foot a few days ago. Is it better? And what about your Ma? So busy she never gets any sleep. Eyes all bloodshot. I've bought her a little medicine. You can take it back with you." Mrs. Zhang strung all her words out in one breath. She didn't seem to be expecting any answers.

Little Rong bit her lips. She rattled the bowls and chopsticks while washing them to stop herself from hearing what Mrs. Zhang was saying. Suddenly two bowls crashed to the floor. Little Rong began to weep. I never heard her cry like that before.

Mrs. Zhang rushed over and hugged Little Rong to her bosom. "A couple of bowls is nothing to get upset about. You don't think I'd scold you for a thing like that? Of course not. A darling girl like

you is hard to find. You ought to consider this place your own home. Every time your father comes he brings something to eat. But he'll never touch a morsel himself. Our two families are closer than any relatives could ever be. Your Ma and Pa won't say anything about the bowls either. Don't cry, don't cry."

At this, Little Rong cried all the harder. I was sure now. Her Ma and Pa were no longer in this world. Covering my face with my hands, I wept too.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Zhang asked, startled.

She raised Little Rong's face and peered at it long and carefully. I could see how sunken Little Rong's eye-sockets had become. It made her eyes look bigger than ever. Her face was colourless and her chin jutted out very sharp. Her usually neat braid hung scattered on the back of her neck. I suppose Mrs. Zhang guessed the truth, for she also started to cry. . . .

The next morning, Little Rong, with tears in her eyes, begged me to take her back to the office of the District Party Committee. "Brother," she said, "I have no home." Of course I agreed, but Mrs. Zhang was dead set against it.

"You're still too small. Wait till you're a little older. Live here with me. I have no daughter," Mrs. Zhang said, and she cried again.

"All three of Young Wang's family are in the fight against the Japanese invaders," Little Rong said in a hurt voice, "but now my family doesn't have a single one. He's only three years older than me. Anything he can do, I can do too."

Mrs. Zhang insisted that Little Rong was too small, that in my work no one would be able to look after her. Little Rong flung herself on Mrs. Zhang's bosom and wept.

"Don't you worry," Little Rong said, after she pulled herself together. "I can take care of myself. I could wash my face when I was four. At five I could dress myself. When I was six I could comb my own hair and make the bed. Anything I can't do, I can learn. I promise not to be naughty, and do what I'm told."

Mrs. Zhang hadn't any answer to that. She got busy wrapping up a few things for us to eat on the road. After a lot of searching she

managed to find a white handkerchief of fine cloth. She handed it to Little Rong.

"We're poor, child," she sighed. "We haven't anything better to give you."

When we left, she walked with us a mile or two. She hated to part with Little Rong. As we said good-bye, she stroked Little Rong's hair and said:

"Go, child. I know you're going to grow up to be a fine young woman."

#### IV. We Become Even Closer

By midnight, we still hadn't reached the office of the District Party Committee. It was raining cats and dogs. What a pain in the neck. I was leading Little Rong by the hand, with her trying to walk faster so as to get up front and lead me. Suddenly she slipped in the mud and landed on her rear. The next instant, my feet shot out from under me and I was sitting right beside her. Little Rong bubbled into peals of laughter. She was laughing so hard as she stood up that she skidded and took another tumble.

I could barely drag my weary legs by the time we finally arrived at the big compound gate of our office. My heart sank within me. No one had given me permission to bring in Little Rong. Conditions were very tough and we were right in the middle of economizing and cutting down on personnel. Suppose Zhao, the section chief, refused to add her to our organization, then what? I had been working under Zhao for two years and he loved me like a father. He always had a kind word and a pleasant smile for me. When his brain would get foggy from too much desk work, he'd say, "How about it, pal. Let's practise a few tricks." And we'd go into a hot session of tumbling and gymnastics for ten or fifteen minutes. He had been building me up till I was as hard as an iron egg. But if Zhao thought something was wrong, you could talk yourself blue in the face and he'd never agree

to it. I was really worried. What could I do for Little Rong if he wouldn't accept her?

I used my wire to lift the gate latch, then said to Little Rong, "You wait here. After I've fixed up everything, I'll bring you in."

She didn't answer, but sat down in the gateway.

Every time I went out on a mission Zhao wouldn't close his eyes till I got back. He said he couldn't sleep. He would read or write, and wait for me. Tonight, again, there was a lamp burning in his room. I peeked in through a crack in the door. He was pacing the floor as he listened to the rain beat against the window. I flung the door open and he turned his head.

"Aiya, young fellow, you had me worried stiff. Why have you come back a day late? I bet you're soaked to the skin." He peeled off my sopping clothes.

I had prepared a whole speech, but now, somehow, I could hardly get a word out.

"I . . . I . . . I'm fine," I stammered. "The rain won't hurt me. I'm used to it. But she . . . she the Japanese killed her mother and father. She's hungry and pale and skinny and she's been out in all this rain. Please, hurry, ask her to come in."

Zhao's eyes widened with surprise. "Who? Where?"

"Aunt Li's daughter. From the message relay station. Little Rong. She's — outside — in the gateway —"

Zhao dashed out into the rain before I could finish. In a few seconds, he was back with Little Rong. He glared at me.

"A black night like this. Rain coming down by the buckets. How could you leave her out there alone in the gateway?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't take her," I mumbled, feeling sort of offended.

"You," Zhao snorted, "you're a prize chump." His eyes were moist.

Little Rong stayed with us from then on. Zhao said she was the daughter of war martyrs and she was very young, so we had to look after her. He said if the chance came, he'd send her to school at our Taihang Mountain base.

I delivered messages every day, as usual, or escorted comrades who were passing through. Little Rong wasn't allowed to do this, and she sulked. She pouted her lips so far out you could have hitched a small mule to them. It made her very unhappy not to be able to join in the work. Zhao kept trying to console her, telling her she could do lots of work when she grew up.

"Why not right now?" she demanded. "Anything Young Wang can do, I can too. Just try me if you don't believe it."

One day Zhao gave me a message for someone in a village about ten miles away. Little Rong heard everything Zhao said — the name of the village, the name of the man. When I went out of the room for a drink of water, the message and Little Rong both disappeared. Little Rong came back before dark. She placed the receipt for the message on the desk before Zhao without a word, her big eyes challenging him.

Zhao agreed that she could work with me as a messenger.

After Little Rong's father and mother had been caught, a new relay station was set up in a village a mile or so from their home. Little Rong's and my main job was to deliver messages to this new station. It was about twenty-five miles away, and you had to get by many enemy fort towers, patrolled motor roads and deep blockade ditches. Now I had a companion on this tough route. The name of every village, the shape of every tree under the blue sky, became engraved on our hearts. When I forgot, she would remember; when she forgot, I would remember. No matter how black the night or how wild the wind, we never lost our way. I used to think — by the time victory comes, our feet will have worn a path as hard and shiny as crystal. Birds in the sky and people taking the path will be able to see a beautiful reflection.

Little Rong was livelier than she had been at home. She talked more. She even made up a jingle about me:

Young Wang, oh Young Wang is my friend's name,  
As a big eater he's won fame.  
Don't think he has no weapon

Because in his hands he carries none,  
When that lad starts to chatter  
He's like a light machine-gun.

I couldn't let her get away with that. I made up one about her:

There's a girl in our house with a perky stuck-up braid,  
Like moons are her big eyes.  
Don't think she's good because she hasn't much to say,  
She's full of tricks and surprise.

Whenever we went out on a mission, she was always wanting to lead the way. She would walk rapidly ahead of me, her neat little braid swinging jauntily from side to side.

I made her cry once. My mother was away, working in the women's association, but she found time to make me a school bag with a motto stitched in golden thread: "Study hard; see the revolution through." I thought the bag was wonderful. It made me want to dance for joy. I proudly showed it to everyone. Then Zhao said to me in a low voice:

"Come with me."

He took me to the western end of the village and pointed towards a date tree. "See that girl there?"

Little Rong was standing beneath the tree with her head lowered. She seemed to be crying. I didn't understand.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"Put yourself in her place," said Zhao. "When you strut around with that school bag your mother made for you, how do you suppose she feels?"

Ah, so that was it. "I'll give the bag to her then, all right?"

"That's up to you. It's none of my business."

I ran up to Little Rong and handed her the bag. "This is for you."

She pushed it away. "No. That's not what I want. . . ."

I grasped her hand, not knowing what to say. Zhao came towards us slowly with measured pace and took us each by the hand.

We walked home in silence through the rows of poplar trees. The sun was setting in the west. Flocks of ravens were returning to their nests where little birds were crying and opening their mouths, waiting for their mamas to feed them.

I wrote to my mother about what had happened. After that, whenever she gave me anything, she had something for Little Rong too. She made me a pair of black cloth shoes; she made Little Rong a pair of flowery ones. As for the school bag, Little Rong and I used it together. She was in charge of it, neater than me. Every day she put the bag in order. My grammar, geography and other textbooks — each had its proper place, not just thrown in any old way like before. If I wanted to read something, she would take the book out for me, so that I wouldn't upset the other contents of the bag.

We worked and lived in the compound of one of the peasant families. Little Rong slept with the lady of the house in the north wing. Zhao and I stayed in the west wing. One night I woke up with a start. Our lamp was lit and Little Rong was sitting beside it, mending the holes in my socks.

"Why can't you do that during the day?" I asked her.

"If Aunt saw me sewing, she'd take it away and do it herself." (Little Rong called our hostess "Aunt".)

"Well, let her then."

Little Rong was silent for a minute. "Your mother does so much for me," she said finally. "I haven't done anything. . . ."

I snatched the socks from her hands. "If that's why you're mending my socks I'd rather burn them, I'd rather go barefoot till my feet rot, I'd rather never wear socks again."

Little Rong looked at me, puzzled. There were tears in her large bright eyes.

"It's not because I want you to mend my socks that I'm good to you," I told her.

"My heart's in the right place," she hastened to explain.

I shook my head. "Not if you act that way."

"How else can I show it?" she said slowly. "This isn't my own home. . . ."

Zhao sat up in bed. He looked as if he had been awake for some time. He draped a coat over his shoulders and pulled Little Rong to sit down beside him.

"This is your home, dear child," he said quietly. "It's my home and Young Wang's. This home has thousands and millions of comrades in it. If anyone of them runs into trouble, it's up to all of us to help. Only bad people care about themselves, and never give a hand to others. . . ."

That night Zhao talked to us for hours. He told us stories of Lenin, he told us about the Long March of the Chinese Red Army, about the war with the Japanese invaders. . . .

In the stillness of the deep night, not even a leaf rustled. The whole world seemed to be listening to Zhao. His voice was deep and vibrant, and he spoke very clearly. I'll never forget the sound of his voice. Later on, in many such quiet nights, I often thought of it.

## V. Home

Who doesn't get homesick? I come from the banks of the Grand Canal. Some people say it's just an ordinary stretch of water, but to me it's the most beautiful river in the world. I love to hear the cicadas at dusk because they remind me of the cicadas along the canal. Two days before I had to leave that home with Pa and Ma, I put some green pears in the pile of wheat stalks at the west end of our village. When pears get over-ripe, they turn brown, and then they're soft and sour, yet wonderfully sweet. If only for those pears alone, I wanted to return home. I wanted to see whether the pears were still there.

Whenever I wasn't busy I liked to walk to the outskirts of the village where we were now living, or climb up on the roof, and look towards the southeast. I'd look and look, because off in the southeast there were many, many villages, and one of them was mine. Our family's compound gate faced west. It opened right on the canal.

Little Rong was the same as me. If we ever went near enough to



her village to see it in the distance, she always wanted to stop and look at it a little longer. I remember a moonlit night in the middle of the eighth month, last year. It was Autumn Festival time. I was sitting on a big mat in Little Rong's courtyard with her and her mother and father. We were looking up at the moon and listening to Aunt Li tell stories. Her voice was warm and nice.

"Can you see it?" she asked. "In the courtyard of the Moon Palace there's a thick pine tree and beneath it sits an old lady working at a spinning wheel. Day and night, she spins and spins, and the thread she spins is fine and white."

"One of the first things I can remember is you telling me how she spins and spins," Little Rong interrupted. "She must have spun an awful lot of thread by now."

"One of the first things I remember is my mother telling *me* how that old lady spins and spins. She's spun mountains and mountains of thread. All the silver people use comes from those mountains. . . ."

On Autumn Festival Day, this year, Little Rong wanted to go home and take a look. We had finished our work and I wanted to see the place too, so I agreed to go with her. We slipped away that evening without a word to anyone.

There wasn't even a wisp of cloud in sight. The sky was a shiny transparent blue. Like a shy bride, the moon, just coming up on the eastern horizon, hid itself behind the leafy branches of the trees. In the dense groves of white poplar trees, the endlessly rustling leaves sounded like a peaceful sparkling stream, flowing where nobody could see it. That must be how the Heavenly River flows too. I thought.

Far off in the moonlight we soon could see Little Rong's compound still standing proudly on the crest of a hill. The old locust tree, tossed by the breeze, moaned and sobbed. The compound gate, the door of the house, even the window-frames, had been gouged out and stolen. Only a skeleton of the house remained. At our approach, sparrows nesting on the beams darted chirruping about with a whirring of wings. The floor was littered with twigs and pieces of brick

and tile which children had thrown in. There were four or five gaping holes in the roof. Moonlight, shining in through trailing spiderwebs, seemed to be saying: See, this is what has become of your house.

Little Rong and me stood in silence. We weren't able to say a word.

In the past, the pomegranate tree in the courtyard was bowed down with bright red fruit this time of the year. Its blossoms had probably been plucked by children as soon as they opened. Now it bore only leaves, and the ground beneath it was parched and cracked.

Little Rong had told me — she was her mother's first child; Aunt Li was forty the year she was born. That spring, her father had planted the pomegranate tree. It grew just as sturdy as Little Rong, putting forth lovely big red blossoms year after year. The tree and Little Rong — two sisters — were all that remained of the family. Now that Little Rong had joined the Eighth Route Army, there was no one left to look after the tree.

The Peke crept out from under a pile of rotting stalks, yapped, and approached us cautiously. When he recognized Little Rong, he jumped all over her, crazy with joy. Crying, Little Rong picked him up. The Peke whimpered and moaned like a child.

After we got back to the office of the Party Committee, neither of us could eat a morsel the whole next day. Little Rong's eyes kept staring straight ahead. The section chief noticed us. In the evening, when he had finished his work, he called us to him.

"Was your job too hard last night?" he asked us.

"No," I said. Little Rong only shook her head.

"Have you been quarrelling?"

\* "We never quarrel," I said.

"Well, what's wrong then?"

I told him all about how we had gone to see Little Rong's house the night before. "It doesn't look like a house at all now. It's enough to make anyone's heart ache," I sighed. "And Aunt and Uncle — gone for ever. . . ."

Zhao took Little Rong's hand and held it tight. After a long silence, he asked slowly, "Is Little Rong's the only family this kind

of thing has happened to since the Japanese invaders attacked China?"

"Of course there have been others too." I answered all the questions. Little Rong said nothing. Her tear-filled eyes were fixed on some ears of wheat, drying on the wall for next season's seed.

"During the Japanese 'Mop Up', comrades were caught. Men were killed, women were raped, children were hacked open. Did you see any of it?"

"I saw plenty."

"How did it make you feel about the enemy?"

"I hate them."

"Of course." Zhao paused a moment, then went on. "That's the way it is. Thousands of mothers, wives and children want to avenge their dear ones. But if everyone only goes after his own personal vengeance without caring about the others, no one will get his revenge. Only if we're all of one heart, if everyone does his job a hundred per cent, if we all study hard, then our army will become very strong and be able to wipe out the enemy. Only in that way can everyone have his revenge...."

Zhao's words made a deep impression on me.

Suddenly, he seemed to remember something. He stood up and walked to the closet and took out two packages wrapped in red paper.

"Yesterday was Autumn Festival Day. You two weren't home, but the comrades left these presents for you."

We opened our gift packages. Each contained a home-made moon-cake — made by the "Aunt" in whose house we were living, for sure. There was also a white pear and a red-covered notebook.

Zhao had stitched notebooks himself. On the second page, he had written — "Only a determined, brave child, striving to progress today can become an excellent Communist Party member tomorrow." Little Rong and I pored over those words a long time. Then we took up our pears and tore into them with gusto. They were fragrant and crisp, and their juice ran down our chins. I looked happily at Little Rong. She looked at me.

"Go easy there, Young Wang," Zhao cautioned. "Don't swallow

it all down in one gulp. Those pits are liable to sprout in your stomach. The next thing you know, crows'll be flying into your mouth to get at the fruit on your pear tree."

Little Rong and me began to laugh. We laughed and laughed till the tears rolled from our eyes.

## VI. I Meet Him Again

Every time I was given a rush job, I felt fine and excited. One day Zhao said to us:

"There's a very important message. If it can reach our militia forces in Yaoshan County before 10 p.m., they'll be able to catch a big traitor around midnight. You'll have to pick it up at our secret relay point first at dusk."

That meant we had to start immediately. The sun had not yet risen, but there were twenty-five miles to be covered before it set again.

"It's only because you two are children and can travel openly in daylight that we're letting you go," Zhao said gravely. "Whether a big fish can be landed depends on the ones wielding the net. Today the net is in your hands. Do you understand?" He thought for a few moments, then added, "This traitor is connected with the death of Little Rong's parents."

When I heard that, my body tightened all over. Little Rong turned pale.

We set out at a fast pace, only wishing we could take ten steps in one. Usually we told each other stories during the trip to relieve our tiredness. Little Rong knew lots of them — how the cuckoo got its name, why the bat doesn't dare to fly in daylight. . . . Today, she didn't say a word, just kept walking almost at a run. It was funny. We made the whole trip without resting a minute, yet neither of us felt tired.

All day we raced the sun. Now it had reached the western horizon. Our destination was a grove of pine trees. There wasn't anyone

there when we arrived. Panting, we climbed up on a low branch and began to eat our muffins. All the time our eyes were darting in every direction. We waited for our contact impatiently. The sunset clouds toyed with us, painting Little Rong's face a beautiful rosy hue. White clouds became golden, then pink, then purple. The seventh and eighth months are famous for clouds with queer shapes, and this was the middle of August. One looked like a forest, one like an old man with a long beard, one like a tiger. They kept changing too. The forest turned into a tall building, the old man became a rooster. It was great fun. I've always loved to watch the changing clouds. I can do it for hours.

Ordinarily you couldn't see the big mountains in the west from this place during the day. But when the setting sun got behind them, they were clearly visible, outlined in gold. Little Rong and me liked to look at those mountains, because beyond them and many more mountains far to the northwest was Yan'an, where our beloved Chairman Mao Zedong lived.

Suddenly, the west wind brought the sound of the yells of Japanese invaders, like the cries of wild wolves. A woman and a child began to wail loudly. . . . Little Rong gripped my shoulder. My heart seemed frozen in my chest. I could hardly breathe. Tears filled my eyes.

The sky darkened. In the distance we heard a quiet cough. Little Rong happily got ready to leap down from the branch. I stopped her.

"Don't get excited. Maybe it's not our man."

We listened and strained our eyes. A shadowy figure drew near. Very relaxed, he sat down on a mound and lit his pipe, then drew on it noisily as if enjoying its flavour. Gazing in the direction of the county seat, he mused aloud:

"Out here this is my kingdom. I can say what I please and curse anyone I please. Those d — Japanese." Beating time with his long-stemmed pipe, he began to sing:

In the sky is the Big Dipper,

In the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region is Mao Zedong,

Our Eighth Route Army has Division Commander Liu,  
And there's also this old peasant, me.  
Don't act tough, little Japanese fiends,  
Vermin like you will never get anywhere.  
China makes your mouths water, does it?  
What a laugh!  
You'll never get back to Tokyo, I can promise you that.

I knew who he was then. No one other than my Marvellous Creature. Zhao had told me that he belonged to the Liaison Section of our District Party Committee. Zhao said he was the cleverest contact in this part of the country. He could find out anything and everything about the enemy. Because he was such a shrewd old man, the comrades called him "Grandpa of the Heavens". He lived under cover right in the occupied city. I hadn't seen him for several days and I thought of him a lot. •

Little Rong and me jumped down from the tree together and ran over to him. He quickly rose to his feet, and we stood staring at each other.

"Aha, so it's you," he laughed, hugging us both to his chest. "I've been wearing my eyes out trying to find you." He fumbled around in his pocket and dug up two poppyseed buns. "I've been carrying something good to eat every time I've come out, hoping and praying I'd meet my little pal again. Now I've run into you at last."

There was a drought that year, and we had to be contented with muffins of red sorghum mixed with husks every day. And so when Grandpa Sun offered us beautiful buns with slices of meat sandwiched inside, we weren't the least bit coy. We gobbled them down as fast as we could. Grinning, his head cocked to one side, Grandpa watched us. From the look of him, he couldn't have been more pleased eating them himself.

I wiped my mouth and formally stepped back from him a pace. "There isn't much time. Please give us the message."

He peered at me and Little Rong as if he didn't recognize us. "Give it to you?"

"That's right," I said. "What's the matter? Don't you think we're good enough?"

"No, no, you're fine," he said hastily, and he handed me a small envelope.

I still wanted to make sure. "Grandpa," I asked him, "what does it say in here?"

"I'm not supposed to tell," he replied thoughtfully. "But if you two weren't dependable the District Party Committee wouldn't have sent you."

"You don't have to worry about us."

"Good," he nodded. "The head of puppet plain-clothes squad in the city, Li Tiankui —"

"Oh," Little Rong gave a startled gasp.

"Do you know him?" asked Grandpa Sun.

"No," I said. "Go on."

"He's the big landlord of Dawang Village, and a dirty traitor. A couple of months ago he was the one who informed on a husband and wife named Li. The Japanese invaders caught them and buried them alive. Tonight at one o'clock he's going back to Dawang again to grab another one of our underground comrades. You hurry and send word to our militia. We've got to catch that dog. The people hate his guts."

"Grandpa," I said in a voice that shook, "this girl is the daughter of those comrades he betrayed."

"Ah." The old man pulled Little Rong into the moonlight and, tilting up her chin, peered at her face for a long while, speechless.

"It's getting late," I cried. "The important thing now is to deliver the message."

Grandpa Sun let Little Rong go. "Right. You kids get going."

Swearing we'd finish our job, I took Little Rong by the hand and rushed off towards where our militia was staying. We didn't say good-bye or even turn our heads. I knew the old man didn't want us to waste a second either.

## VII. Unsettled Accounts

At nine o'clock we found the militia. I had known the commander a long time. He was of medium height, thin. When he finished reading the message, he gritted his teeth and said, "Good. Good."

The battalion was scattered over different parts of the county. That night there were only two squads with the commander — altogether sixteen men. As soon as he heard that Little Rong was from Dawang and that I had been there often, he agreed to take us along as guides. But he cautioned us that we had to listen to orders. He gave each of us a flashlight and said we could help the militia comrades search Tianshui's house after the traitor was caught.

The commander questioned Little Rong about the layout of Tianshui's compound. She told him how many rooms there were, who lived there, and so on, while she sketched it out very clearly on a page of the commander's notebook. Surrounded by the comrades, she looked like a little hostess, sitting beside that low square table on the brick oven-bed. Her eyes had a special gleam, and her face was flushed. It was as if all the words she didn't say in the past she had been saving to spill out now.

Like a whirlwind, the militia swept down on Dawang. It was already eleven o'clock. The commander said no one was to make a sound.

A grove of date trees grew beside Tianshui's tiled-roof compound, and some comrades crawled from the trees on to the roof, then slipped down into the courtyard and hid themselves. A few took up posts at approaches to the compound. Luckily, most of the dogs in the village had been starved to death a long time ago. Otherwise they would have set up a racket and given the whole show away. I was ordered to keep a look-out from atop a small garret on the roof of the north wing of the compound. Little Rong, complaining that she was too short and couldn't see a thing, climbed a small white poplar near the compound wall. She used to search for birds' eggs in that tree, and she shinnied up it as easily as a cat.



Everything was ready. The night was still and peaceful. It was hard to believe anything was going to happen. On the branches of the trees, ravens lazily ruffled their feathers in their sleep.

The quieter it was the tenser I became. I didn't even dare breathe too loud. Suddenly I heard someone knocking at Tiankui's compound gate. Before I could make out who it was, the gate was flung open and several voices cried together:

"Hands up."

Then two shots split the air, and there was a veritable hubbub. My heart beat like mad. I was just itching to get my hands on that dirty traitor, to punch him, kick him. But I couldn't make a move without orders.

"After him, comrades," I heard the commander call. "Tiankui's getting away."

I was nearly frantic. The militia comrades were searching all over the compound.

From her perch in the tree, Little Rong pointed her flashlight at a pile of wheat stalks and yelled, "Over here. Hurry. There's someone here."

The men all ran towards where she was pointing. In that instant, Tiankui fired five shots at Little Rong's flashlight.

"Little Rong," I shouted, very frightened for her.

Her light went out for a second, then immediately went on again. I heaved a sigh of relief. By then the comrades had grabbed the traitor Tiankui.

Beyond the compound wall, someone cried in alarm, "Little Rong's fallen out of the tree."

Those were the most terrible words I had ever heard. I scrambled down from the roof and flew out of the compound. Many peasants had gathered near the poplar tree, some carrying lanterns. It wasn't so bad. Little Rong had been shot in the leg, but the fall hadn't hurt her. She had landed on a pile of sorghum stalks. She lay with her eyes closed, her lips slightly parted. I was trembling like a fool. I couldn't cry. I couldn't speak. The comrades bandaged her leg and the commander wrote a letter of introduction. He said she should be

taken across the railway and sent to the military hospital in our Taihang Mountain base right away.

They put her on a stretcher and covered her with a quilt. An old man called her name, "Rong, Rong, Rong," but she didn't answer.

Outside the village there were two sharp reports. "That's the end of Tiankui the traitor," the comrades said happily, in a low voice.

Little Rong sat bolt upright as if nothing was wrong with her, then fell back again. Smiling, she closed her eyes.

I followed the stretcher outside the village. The comrades kept telling me to go back, but I was deaf to everything. I wanted to hear Little Rong's voice again, even if she only groaned. Walking beside the stretcher, I hardly knew what I was doing. I pulled the quilt down from her face and asked her, weeping:

"Can't you say anything?"

"I can speak now," she said. "I've come out of it."

Then at last I knew she'd be all right. The comrades again told me to halt. What could I do? I stopped. I stood motionless watching the stretcher moving west, disappearing into the darkness. On leaden feet, I returned slowly to the village. My heart felt scooped out and empty.

An announcement about the execution of Tiankui was pasted on the wall. The comrades had also captured eight other plain-clothes enemy agents and trussed their arms behind them. With these traitors in tow, the militia unit marched away. Again the village became silent. There was only the sound of the white poplar leaves, rustling, rustling, like a flowing stream.

Little Rong's flashlight still shone down from the tree, its beam lighting the place where Tiankui had been captured. After she had been hit and couldn't hold on any longer, she must have wedged the flashlight into the fork of a branch to make sure it would keep pointing at the traitor.

Yes, my little partner was brave, and stubborn. I ought to be like her.

I wiped my eyes dry and headed straight for where I had to go.

# Crickets

*Ren Dalin*

This summer has been especially hot, and while the Xiling district, where I live, might be in the mountains, during the day the stifling heat is unbearable. Your whole body gleams with sweat, and even when you only wear shorts, the sweat pours down your body. Only towards evening, when the sun is going down behind the mountains, does a cool breeze start blowing in from the Beigan Mountains, laden with the smell of bitter mugwort and pine resin. I finished dinner quickly, put on my white T-shirt, tucked a straw fan into my belt and we headed off to the area in front of Zhoujiatai Gate where we go cricket fighting.

I really enjoyed this summer. On graduating from primary school, I returned home having sat for the high school entrance exam, and I had no school assignments for the summer holidays. The co-op leader had not called on me to do any work. So I made the most of it. During the day I went swimming or fishing, and at night I went out to catch crickets. Of course, I sometimes helped my big brother, but this was never anything too strenuous.

One day, Fuxing and Young Ajin were pitting their "champion" crickets against each other in a fierce fight. I was among the many spectators watching enthusiastically. Suddenly someone nudged me. I turned around and saw Xu Xiaokui standing there.

"Lü Lixuan," he said to me, "Come with me quickly!"

"What's up?" I asked as I followed him over to the date tree. He stopped and took two letters out from inside his T-shirt. "This one's for you, and this one's mine. I just collected them from the post office."

I quickly saw from the envelope that it was from the high school. I immediately tore it open and took out a stencilled letter. My eyes quickly skimmed the page.

"What's it say?" Xu Xiaokui pressed me for an answer.

"I haven't got in," I calmly replied.

"You haven't got in?" Xu Xiaokui gasped his surprise. "Well there's no need then for me to bother opening my letter."

I grabbed Xu Xiaokui's letter and tore it open, and read that he had, in fact, also failed to get into the high school.

"Well, neither of us got in," Xu Xiaokui remarked, "What'll we do now?"

Just then, I noticed Shi Xiaofen standing there. Shi Xiaofen was the daughter of the co-op leader, whom we called Uncle Zhengen. She had finished primary school before us, and for quite a while now had been doing farm work. Intentionally, I raised my voice:

"What'll we do? Of course I'll be quite happy working here on the farm! I'll bet I produce a lot of grain for the state! . . ."

Well that's easier said than done. Next morning, when my brother was shaking me awake in my bed, between yawns I impatiently said:

"What are you doing? It's so early — leave me in peace. I want to sleep a bit longer."

"The way we co-op members see it," my big brother said, "it's already late in the day. Go and wash your face with cold water, and you'll soon wake up. Starting from today you'll have to get up earlier. Uncle Zhengen has assigned you to our brigade."

I jumped up, half-heartedly washed my face, grabbed a straw hat and headed off with my brother.

On the way, my brother told me that the co-op was starting the early rice harvest today; he said that if we could start the season off by getting five hundred kilos of grain from a field that was nearly 4 acres then we would be setting an example for the mutual-aid teams and farming families of the surrounding district. He said that all the able-bodied persons in the co-op had to take part in the rice harvest; the harvesting had to be done quickly and properly, and that none of

the plants were to be trampled. My brother also said (probably to scare me) that if I was unable to cut rice, then I would be in charge of the young children picking up the dropped ears of grain, but added that work points were also allocated for this. I stared at him blankly: "Who wants to pick up dropped grain? I mightn't have ever harvested rice, but I'll get the knack of it once I pick up a sickle. I bet I'll get just as much as you."

We reached the fields. Pfew! There were so many people! They were already at work harvesting. Shi Xiaofen was there — she had rolled the cuffs of her trousers right up, and was bent over harvesting. I walked over to the path between the fields, where Zhao Dayun and Xu Xiaokui were standing. Zhao Dayun had finished primary school together with the rest of our class, but didn't sit for the high school entrance exam, because he had long ago decided to stay at home and work on the farm.

Uncle Zhengen soon came over. He sized us up for a while, then said: "You've never done this type of work before, so today we will be testing you out."

I quickly replied, "Uncle Zhengen, I bet I'll pass the test. Last summer holidays I helped the mutual-aid team with some of their harvesting!"

Zhao Dayun said nothing. Xu Xiaokui rolled up the sleeves of his cotton shirt, and so we began the harvesting.

I am one of those people who will have a crack at anything and while I was harvesting I felt that I was doing a pretty good job. I remembered what my big brother had said about not holding the rice stalks too tight; at the same time I kept a firm grip on the sickle. I kept my arm supple as I wielded the sickle, and the action went smoothly. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Xu Xiaokui. Gosh! He had dropped back, a good five or six feet behind. Later I noticed him standing there sharpening his sickle on a whetstone. He must have blunted his blade. I worked on for a time, only to look back again later, and notice that Xu Xiaokui was still standing there, rolling up his sleeves again. As soon as I saw this, I knew that he had "failed" the test. It shouldn't have taken me long to figure that out.

Xu Xiaokui had been spoiled by his mother since he was a baby and he was hopeless at everything, except for cutting hay for the goats. Thinking of this made me work with a renewed skill. I was convinced that of the three of us I was the best at cutting rice. . . .

At that moment I trod on a cricket. Looking carefully, I saw that it was no ordinary cow-shit cricket, but a real, live snake's head cricket, although it was just as big as a cow-shit cricket.

I threw down my sickle and pounced on the cricket. Unexpectedly it gave me a nasty bite, and as soon as I loosened my grip, it wriggled out through my fingers. Hey! You little bugger! You're not going to get away — no crevices for you to hide in here. I didn't foresee that a couple of hops landed him beside a pile of rice stalks I had just cut, and that in an instant he was burrowing into it. I was boiling mad and picked up the bundle of stalks and shook it. I ended up beating it on the ground a few times, until eventually the little fellow leapt out and I deftly grabbed him back into my palm. "My little precious! Stop wriggling around, while I'm addressing you by your new name — General Black-whiskers I'll call you! Seeing that you've got such long whiskers." While I was saying this I took a little bamboo tube I carried around with me from out of my pocket, and I put "General Black-whiskers" inside it. Not much scares me, but when I stood up and looked around, I got a shock — Uncle Zhengen was standing right behind me.

"What are you up to?" he said with a grin.

I felt my ears burning with embarrassment, although I could still manage a quick reply: "A big cricket, Uncle Zhengen. It's got to be a snake's head cricket, because its nippers are venomous. It'll be able to beat Fuxing's champion red headed cricket! . . ."

"Crickets are a lot of fun. I used to love cricket fighting. Lü Lixuan, I think you should join that group over there." He pointed behind us. "We also give work points for picking up the dropped ears of rice."

I was nettled and said: "Uncle Zhengen, I won't go and pick up the dropped rice, I want to cut rice. I . . . I promise I won't go catching any more crickets in the field!"

"No more cricket catching in the field, now that's wonderful," he said with a smile, "but I've just checked the rice you've cut. You cut it so quickly, that you left a lot of rice still standing in the field!"

"I promise I'll be more careful from now on," I said, "I will learn how to do it properly."

"So you shall," Uncle Zhengen said, "but not today, because this field is meant to produce 500 kilos of grain to set an example. When we're harvesting one of the other fields, you can learn how to cut grain!"

So I was forced to go to the pathway which ran through the rice field. I was lucky because I found that Xu Xiaokui and Zhao Dayun had also ended up there, where they were sitting on the ground.

"How's it with you?" I asked. "It looks like the three of us are out of luck."

Xu Xiaokui dismissed my remark with a wave of his hand. "Don't talk such crap," he quietly explained, "Zhao Dayun has cut his ankle open and lost a lot of blood!"

I looked — "Hey!" Zhao Dayun really was injured. A large bamboo leaf was stuck over his ankle and blood was trickling out from under the leaf.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

Zhao Dayun clenched his teeth as he smeared a large glob of blood with his fingers. Gazing out over the fields, he said in a low voice:

"I cut myself with the sickle. I probably wasn't handling it properly, because I was having a lot of trouble cutting the rice." He stretched out his hand as though holding a sickle and gave a few swings. Then he clenched his fist and thumped his leg.

So we ended up picking up the ears of rice, and that with some of the younger children. The worst thing of all was: Shi Xiaofen was cutting rice near where we were. She wielded her sickle like an old hand at it: swish, swish, she cut the rice. Each time she put down a bundle, she would straighten her back, toss her plaits back over her shoulder, and turn her head to smile at us.

That evening, as soon as I'd finished dinner, I headed off to find

Fuxing.

"Fuxing," I said, "come on, let's go and fight crickets!"

"How come?" Fuxing asked. "Have you caught a new cricket?"

I raised the lid of the container I kept crickets in just enough for him to have a look. "This is my new cricket I've called General Black-whiskers. He's a real snake's head cricket — his nippers are poisonous." Then I lied a little: "I caught him lying beside a snake I came across."

"Really? Looks like we'll be having a real battle!" Then Fuxing added with excited bravado: "Yeah, well my Red-headed King loves a good fight, and he's already thrashed twelve crickets!"

"But if your Red-headed King was bitten by a snake's head cricket he'd just shrivel up," I said, "because the nippers on a snake's head cricket are venomous!"

People starting gathering around us, once we started cricket fighting outside the Zhoujiatai Gate. I enticed General Black-whiskers out with a blade of grass and he suddenly opened up his knife-like pincers. He started chirping loudly and headed in to attack. General Black-whiskers charged up to the Red-headed King, and then the two champion fighters clashed. As soon as the Red-headed King used his pincers to throw my cricket off balance, General Black-whiskers was tossed right out of the container onto the ground. There was a sound of disappointment from the crowd. When I lifted General Black-whiskers up from the ground and put him back into the container, his pair of pincers no longer met, and one of his legs was lame. I waved the blade of grass in front of him and when I tapped him with it, he shrank back then started retreating. Everyone started laughing. "Ha, some General Black-whiskers, more like General Bag of Wind!" Shi Xiaofen contemptuously commented.

Quite honestly, I'll never forget that particular humiliation as long as I live.

I sat down under the date tree and stared at the peaks of the Beigan Mountains opposite. The sky was now completely dark, and a cool breeze had sprung up. I was sitting there on my own not wanting to go home.



Xu Xiaokui came up and sat beside me. "Don't take it so hard," he tried consoling me. "It wasn't a real snake's head cricket, so there's no need to feel sorry for yourself. . . ."

Somehow the sound of his voice only made me feel worse. In the distance an owl was hooting: "Ooh! Ooh! . . ." Its cry circled the valley.

We sat there for a long time.

"Somehow," I said, "I've got to get everything that went wrong today out of my system. The one way out of this fix is to catch a real snake's head cricket. I won't be happy until I beat Fuxing!"

"I can help you," Xu Xiaokui said. "You know that graveyard at the back of my house? There must be snake's head crickets there. Every evening I can hear the crickets calling from there."

"Real snake's head crickets don't just call out at any time," I said, "at the second watch they cry out twice, at the third watch three times, at the fifth five times."

"Then we'll head out after sunset," he said, "But if my mother finds out, she'll really lay into me. She says the graveyard is haunted."

I shivered involuntarily: "I don't believe in ghosts," I said. "Your mother won't be any problem, just wait till after dark then sneak out. Xu Xiaokui, we have to go through with it. Let's start tonight and any snake's head crickets we catch belong to both of us."

Xu Xiaokui was excited by my plan, and he agreed right away. Getting him to join in any adventure was never easy.

After sunset, my big brother headed off to a meeting at the office of the co-op, so I borrowed the torch he left behind. I sneaked out and went over to the entrance of Xu Xiaokui's house. Ten minutes later we were both heading off for the graveyard.

The sky was filled with wispy clouds, so that the light of the half moon kept going out and in. An utter stillness surrounded us, and the silence was only relieved by the occasional croak of a green frog. In the distant valley, a bird was making a strange call, just like a child crying.

All the tiny hairs on my body stood on end. I called out: "Xu Xiaokui!"

Xu Xiaokui was close beside me. He held my hand tight, and I could feel that his hand was cold and clammy. When we reached the edge of the graveyard, the moon seemed to be totally hidden by the clouds. We squatted down and didn't move, waiting for the crickets to start chirping. Just then, the wind seemed to get stronger, and although I buttoned my cotton shirt up all the way, I could still feel the cold. There was another gust of wind and the patch of long grass to our left started rustling. Xu Xiaokui's eyes grew quite round, as he stared without blinking at the derelict graves. I realized that he was quite terrified.

"That's funny," I said. "There hasn't been a single cricket. Maybe it's because it's a cool night?"

"There probably won't be any tonight, let's go!" Xu Xiaokui said, "... I don't feel too comfortable here..."

I knew that he regretted coming. Quite honestly, I also wanted to go home soon, because it was none too pleasant crouched in the pitch dark at the edge of this graveyard. But to put on a brave face, I managed to sound relaxed: "If any ghosts do appear, I won't be showing them any consideration..."

I hadn't finished what I wanted to say, when a sudden rustling came from the low-lying patch of grass to our left, and a bird flew out. It gave me quite a fright — shivers ran up my spine and I broke out in a cold sweat.

Xu Xiaokui grabbed hold of my hand and whispered, "Let's go back, I'm scared..."

"Quiet!" I said anxiously. From the long grass I heard a rustling noise, which sounded like someone's heavy footsteps slowly coming our way: "Crunch... crunch... crunch..."

I could hear a buzzing in my ears and my heart had even seemed to stop. Xu Xiaokui was shaking from head to toe. Suddenly he turned and bolted. He ran so quickly it seemed that a ghost was hard on his tail. He tripped over on a mound of earth, then immediately got up and continued running in the direction of his house.

Soon, the sound in the grass stopped. I was about to leap to my feet and make a getaway, when I heard soft footsteps coming from be-

hind me. With this I almost fainted, and I don't know how, but I summoned the courage; I just remember turning around and shining the torch. In the torchlight I saw someone walking towards me. When he drew near, he tapped me on the shoulder, and said in a low voice:

"Lü Lixuan, what are you doing here?"

Just then, my heart leapt again. I felt so exhausted I just wanted to swoon — from my squatting position I slumped back onto the ground. I heaved an enormous sigh and said: "Great! Zhao Dayun! You nearly — you nearly scared Xu Xiaokui out of his wits."

Zhao Dayun smiled and said: "I didn't think we'd meet up here."

"Are you also out catching crickets?" I asked.

"You must be keen to be still catching crickets?" Zhao Dayun commented.

It seems that he was out cutting hay. There was a shortage of firewood, and when the grass had dried out, it could be used as a substitute for firewood. But as soon as I went with Zhao Dayun to where he was cutting firewood, I realized that there was more to it. The grass there was so long that it was waist high like rice plants. Zhao Dayun had already cleared a patch so that there was a bare area without a blade of grass; he had carefully tied up the cut grass and laid it on the ground in the same way you bundle up harvested rice. It was quite obvious that this was where Zhao Dayun was getting the knack of cutting rice, because he had only left school at the same time as I had, and yet he was far more skilled at cutting rice than I was.

"Hey," I said to him, "this is where you practise how to cut rice!"

"I guess you're right." He was silent for a bit, then continued, "Yes, like you, I've never harvested rice before, so I suppose I must have learned it somehow?"

"But why do you practise at night and not in the day?"

"I'm so busy during the day. I have to pick up ears of rice and help my mother fetch water and feed the pigs, so when would I find the time?" Zhao Dayun replied. "Besides, this is a pretty stupid way to practise cutting rice, and if anybody saw me I'd feel pretty embarrassed. . . ."

He ordered me not to tell anyone about this. I promised not to tell anyone, except Xu Xiaokui. I told him that Xu Xiaokui would believe in ghosts from now on unless I can convince him that there's an ordinary explanation, so I'll have to tell him.

Zhao Dayun agreed with me. When he had bundled up the hay he had cut, we returned home together.

Soon, the harvest of the model field was completed, and harvesting the other rice fields could begin. We took up sickles once again, and supervised by Uncle Zhengen, we were again "tested". I failed the test once more. This time I didn't try catching crickets at all — I didn't even come across a loach buried in the mud. All my concentration went on cutting rice. But Uncle Zhengen told me that what I had cut was very rough and was no improvement on before; in fact, it was not as good. If everyone cut like this, he said, at least 15 per cent of what was cut would be wasted. At the same time, he was full of praise for Zhao Dayun and told him he'd made great progress, that he had cut carefully, neatly and according to the rules, and that his work was worth 9 work points! He told him: "You're a real primary graduate!" As though I were some sort of fake.

As for Xu Xiaokui; he was sick for three whole days after running home that night. Although I told him how Zhao Dayun used to practise cutting rice at night, he didn't seem to have much faith in my story. His mother roundly cursed Uncle Zhengen behind his back, saying that he had been too exacting with Xu Xiaokui and that to force a boy to cut rice on a boiling hot day was sure to make him sick. Henceforth, she wasn't allowing Xiaokui out again to harvest.

Before long Zhao Dayun was regarded as a fully-fledged co-op member. Every evening he was evaluated for work points along with the other members, and at the meetings of the co-op members he would have something to say from time to time. As for me — I was still doing odd jobs; at times I would be shown how to cut rice properly by some of the co-op members, at other times I would work the waterwheel, and when the work points were allotted, I would only be put down for one or two points. In the mornings and evenings I would troop all over the place catching crickets.

Towards sunset one evening, we were all relaxing out the front of Zhoujiatai Gate. Zhao Dayun was returning from washing his feet in the river. From his pocket he took out a match-box and said with a grin:

"I've caught a cricket as well. But I don't know if it's any good?"

We were all pretty surprised, and I remarked: "Oh, so Zhao Dayun has caught a cricket as well; so the dog learns to catch mice!"

Xu Xiaokui said: "What type of cricket did you catch? A centipede cricket, a snail cricket, a snake's head cricket, or some other kind? The centipede cricket has a red body, and it's real fierce. But they're afraid of frog crickets, because centipedes are afraid of frogs."

I interrupted them: "Don't confuse him. It's the first cricket he's caught, so how should he know? Give us a look at your cricket. Maybe it isn't even a cricket, but some sort of grey cockroach!"

Zhao Dayun waited until we had finished speaking, then he slowly opened the match-box to show us his cricket.

As soon as I saw it, I was pretty envious because it was a very large cricket and its head was black and shiny.

I ran over to get Fuxing, and then I helped Zhao Dayun as he prepared his cricket to do battle with Fuxing's.

A lot of people were watching. Zhao Dayun's cricket looked fairly clumsy, and to begin with, it stood stockstill, and like Zhao Dayun it didn't make the slightest move. Everyone standing around watching seemed quite disappointed, when suddenly it twitched its whiskers and started advancing slowly. The moment Fuxing's Red-headed King charged, Zhao Dayun's immediately butted it fiercely, bit into the Red-headed King's neck and tossed it down. We all burst into cheering. Then the two crickets were locked together in fierce combat. We couldn't tell which one had the advantage. At first the Red-headed King was on top, and he picked up his opponent and threw him down to the edge of the container. With this he trumpeted his victory. But then the situation changed and Zhao Dayun's fiercely bit into the neck of the Red-headed King, and tossed him upside down, trailing him around twice in the container. And so the power of the Red-headed King began to wane. Then the Red-headed King suf-

fered blows to the stomach and tail, and though he rallied for a while and fought back, Zhao Dayun's succeeded in grabbing the nippers of the Red-headed King and tossed him out of the "ring".

I had never seen a fight as fierce as this. Everyone was watching with wide eyes, so rapt they'd forgotten to cheer. The fight was a victory to Zhao Dayun's cricket, who earned the title "Black-headed Commander".

From then on, our great interest in cricket fighting increased, because a new "commander" had emerged, and everyone wanted to fight him. Zhao Dayun took on all comers. You only had to go and find him after dinner, and he would quite willingly pit his cricket against as many as four contenders, but no other cricket could take the title off his.

A few days passed and the weather was beginning to get cooler, when I eventually did catch a cricket in the graveyard. This was no ordinary cricket. It had red markings on its back, and I held high hopes for it. After dinner, I didn't even bother washing my feet, but headed straight out to find Zhao Dayun.

"Zhao Dayun," I said, "come quickly, your 'Black-headed Commander' has finally met his match! I've caught a genuine centipede cricket, with red spots on his back."

"What Black-headed Commander," he said. "I set him free a long time ago."

"You're lying!" I was shocked, and had raised my voice.

"It's the truth. I really did let him go. What was the point in always keeping him locked up? I never had enough spare time for him. For the last few days I've been learning how to plough. It's really interesting, but much harder than cutting rice. . . ."

"You! What do you mean by this?" I was so disappointed I couldn't hold back my tears.

I was silent for a while. I lifted up the cricket container and threw it angrily down onto the ground. The container broke open and a cricket with a broken leg crawled from inside a piece of the smashed container.

That evening Uncle Zhengeng asked that I go along to the co-op

office. He invited me to sit down facing him, then he gave me an abacus, and slowly said:

"This is a maths problem I want you to work out. A student gets 7 marks for language, 9 for maths, 10 for nature study, 10 for music, and 6 for physical education. What's his total mark?"

I immediately replied: "42".

"Now," he went on, "another student gets 4 for language, 3 for maths, 7 for nature study, 8 for both music and P.E., that's a total of..."

Without waiting for him to finish, I gave the answer: "30". But I couldn't help wondering: These marks can't be for real. I've never heard of schools giving marks out of 10. Marks are always out of 5, or they are a percentage. And if this is a percentage system, then how could kids get such lousy marks?

Uncle Zhengeng could see that I was having my doubts. He said: "Dummy! Of course these aren't exam results, they're the work points of two of the co-op members. And you've passed this particular exam." Then he explained to me that the co-op had just received 20 new households as members, and because of this expansion, they needed another accountant. He ended with a serious proposal: "From tomorrow, you can be the accountant's assistant."

First thing next morning I went to the office for the co-op to start work. And from then on, I stopped catching crickets, because I was flat out with my job. But as well as that, ever since Zhao Dayun let his "Black-headed Commander" go, I don't know why, but everyone's interest in catching crickets waned.

## Snake-bite Doctor

*Hong Xuntao*

It was about noon and the sun hung high above the eaves; a big rooster was stretching its neck to crow. The market at Qinglongzhen was still on, crowded and clamorous.

On his way home with satchel under his arm, Zhang Tugen pushed through the crowd and walked along the street. It was Saturday. As there was no class in the afternoon, he asked a few good friends to gather firewood on Phoenix Peak.

At the end of the street on the grass was a small gathering of people. What were they looking at? Being short, Zhang Tugen could not see anything even though he stood on tiptoe, so he pushed into the crowd.

How frightful! In front of a ragged old man was a large basket of snakes of different sizes. They were red, yellow, green and black, and of various shapes. They were being teased by someone, so that they raised their heads, showed their sharp scarlet tongues, and hissed.

The old man introduced himself and then took a light green, short-tailed snake from his basket. Zhang Tugen, who lived all year round in the mountain, knew the snake at first sight: it was the venomous "five-step snake". Once bitten by it, one would lose consciousness before taking five steps no matter how strong he was.

The old man wound it round his arms at will, turning it this way and that. After handling it for a while, he put his finger into its mouth and was bitten. No, this was not a magic show! It was a real snake bite! Zhang Tugen got a close view from the front row. Suddenly the old man's arm swelled like a ball being pumped up. The colour of the skin around the wound turned from red to purple and from purple to



black. He bore the exquisite pain, drops of sweat the size of beans rolling down his forehead.

All the spectators were anxious. Zhang Tugen could not refrain from stamping his feet. The old man, however, was quite at ease, and took some herbal paste from his inner pocket and applied it to the wound before the eyes of the crowd. Lo! In less than five minutes the old man wiped the sweat from his forehead. His suffering seemed to be relieved, and in another five minutes the swelling was going down.

The spectators cheered. Zhang Tugen was puzzled. This reminded him of an incident three years before.

It was a misty morning. One could not see those passing by, nor the path beneath. Mount Siming was wet with dew. Tugen had been raking for firewood with his neighbour Zhou Baoliu on Golden Rooster Peak. Heads high, they hummed as they walked along. They were on a slope when suddenly they heard a hissing sound. It was a snake as thick as the beam of a steelyard. It was light green in colour, a big "five-step snake". It bit Baoliu on her toe, and before taking three steps she fainted with pain. Zhang Tugen, in panic, shouted: "Help! Help!" and when she was finally carried home she was in critical condition. They sent for a doctor, who remarked: "It's too late to save her! We could have if we'd chopped off her toe just at the moment she was bitten." And so Zhou Baoliu died at the age of twelve after screaming and rolling in pain all night. . . .

Zhang Tugen shuddered.

The old man removed the medicinal paste. His skin was its original colour. Only a small red spot the size of a grain of rice remained. Slapping his chest, he further introduced himself:

"My name is Ho Ahsj and I'm a snake doctor. My skill is handed down from my ancestors. I treat snakebite with a special medicine, and guarantee the treatment effective. I'm now living in Guandi Temple on Mount Bronze Bull north of the town. . . .

Zhang Tugen at once recalled what he had said when Baoliu was dying: "There are so many snakes in these mountains. It's a pity that people bitten by poisonous snakes have to die. How good it

would be to know how to cure snakebite and save them!"

Now he was thinking what a good chance this was to learn the skill. He made up his mind to be a doctor and cure snakebite. When he returned home he kept thinking about it and forgot his supper. Of course he did not go to Phoenix Peak for firewood that afternoon. He concealed the whole story from his father and asked his mother for money with which he bought eight feet of cloth, two catties of wine and several packs of incense. He went to the old temple on Mount Bronze Bull to find Ho Ahsi. As Tugen was so eager to learn from him, Ahsi was sure to acknowledge him as his disciple.

The news about Zhang Tugen's acknowledgement of Ho Ahsi as his master spread in the village like a gust of wind.

"Tugen will come to no good. He can learn anything, why should he choose to be a snakebite doctor from a beggar?" gossiped his relatives and neighbours.

Some kind-hearted people tried to dissuade him.

"Tugen, your family isn't so hard up. Can you make a career by learning from a beggar?"

His mother too had heard the gossip about her son and called him to her many times to talk with him.

"My son, leave that beggar at once. There's sure to be trouble when your father hears of this."

Zhang Tugen was confused by all the talk and went to see Uncle Shun Fu of the unit of people's armed forces. He had been in the village. His wife had passed away long before, and had left no children. Uncle Shun Fu was a cook in the unit and used to come shopping in the village. Zhang Tugen heard him talk about revolution, and he thought of Uncle Shun Fu as a well learned man, a person he could tell everything on his mind.

Uncle Shun Fu was very pleased to hear that Tugen wanted to learn how to cure snakebite, and he patted him on the shoulder and smiled to encourage him.

"Good, my boy, to learn well the skill of a doctor and cure snakebite will enable you to relieve people in distress! It's a fine thing to

do. Keep on! Don't be disheartened!"

Zhang Tugen was confident now and paid no more attention to the mockery and ridicule of certain people.

One day the news finally reached his father. It happened like this:

His father had gone up the hill to get his share of firewood when he got into a quarrel with Tang Benho of Mount Golden Rooster. They swore at each other and finally their curses fell on their respective grandfather and grandson.

Tugen's father scolded:

"Your grandfather-in-law stole bamboo shoots and was beaten on the bottom by government officers. Are you proud of that?"

Tang Benho returned the slander:

"How shameless of you to let your son learn to be a snakebite doctor and cheat people out of their money!"

Tugen's father returned home in a towering rage and gave his son a sound lashing with an ox-whip.

"Go again to that beggar to learn snakebite doctoring, and I'll take a knife and sever the tendon in your heel!" he swore.

Tugen's mother felt the father's punishment of the child cruel and really too much. She muttered this opinion, which caused a quarrel between the old couple so that one of them pounded on the table and bench while the other howled. Neither spoke to the other for four or five days.

Still Zhang Tugen went after school to Mount Bronze Bull to see Ho Ahsi.

Ho Ahsi, however, was not willing to really teach Tugen his skill, and this annoyed the boy the most. When they went out to tend the sick, Ho Ahsi refused to let him see how he mixed his herbal drugs. In half a year Tugen had learned to use only some ten to twenty of the most common herbs.

Further more, Ho Ahsi prolonged treatment time in curing snake-bite by reserving his most effective medicines, and also by using seven "shares" of drug to combat eight "shares" of disease. In this way he

could extend the number of sick calls and so enjoy more free drinks and outcall fees.

Zhang Tugen objected to this and used to say:

"Master, why not apply good drugs and cure the patient quickly?"

Ho Ahsi smiled, wiped his greasy mouth smelling of alcohol and replied:

"Silly lad. If the patient recovers quickly, what shall we eat?"

Tugen knew that his master was afraid of his job being taken over by others, and his biggest problem now was to get his master to teach him all he knew, and treat his patients honestly.

One day, Tugen got an idea. When he went to Guandi Temple to see Ho Ahsi, he presented his master with two pieces of meat and a pot of wine.

As Ho Ahsi was greedy, he started devouring the meat and wine at once.

After much random chatting, and noticing that Ahsi was really in his cups, he ventured:

"Master, I've been learning from you for quite a while but there are still a lot of snakes I can't identify. How can I be a good snake-bite doctor if you don't show them to me?"

Moistening his lips with his tongue and putting the wine cup aside, Ho Ahsi took his snake basket out from under the bed. He lifted the cover and handed the basket to Tugen.

"See for yourself. I'm ready to answer your questions. The snakes are quite poisonous. Be careful not to touch them."

As a matter of fact, Zhang Tugen had known all these snakes for a long time. He took the basket to the light in a niche in the wall. Inside were Green Coat, One Step, the Qi, Pigeon, Six Head, Bamboo Joint. . . . All were snakes of the most poisonous kinds.

Moving snake basket caused the snakes to stir, and a stench assailed Tugen's nostrils, nauseating him.

Zhang Tugen began to feel weak-hearted until he thought of the death of the little girl Baoliu and remembered what Uncle Fu Shun had said: "Learn well the skill to relieve the distress of the people."

This gave him courage and strength. He set his teeth and with unusual boldness put his left hand into the basket.

All of a sudden, a big yellow *Qi* bit his hand twice. It was like a knife thrust into his chest. His whole body seemed to be on fire, and he cried out:

"Master! I'm bitten!"

Ahsi was absorbed in his eating and drinking, but he heard the call and was deeply disturbed. The wine cup fell to the ground and broke, spilling the wine. Ahsi hurriedly put Tugen to bed. He took a parcel from under the bed and chose a few herbs from it. He put them into a vessel, mixed a medicine and applied it to his wound.

Zhang Tugen was trembling with pain, his teeth clenched. He opened his eyes slightly and peeped at the herb in Ahsi's hand. He memorized the colour, shape and method of preparation of the herbs.

This time not only did Tugen learn the action of a few more herbs, he experienced the pain of snakebite. He was more determined than ever to be a doctor for curing snakebite.

One winter night, a strong wind shook the trees on the mountain and all the mountain paths were covered with snow. Icicles hung a foot long from the eaves. The whole village was submerged in silence.

On such cold nights everyone had gone to bed except Zhang Tugen, who was studying his lessons under the quivering light of a bean-oil lamp.

After reviewing his books, he examined a big parcel of medicinal herbs, trying to memorize the properties and action of each. He was as quiet as possible so as not to wake up his parents.

Suddenly a shadow flashed across the window. Following a slight knock on the door, someone called his name. He opened the door and saw it was Limper Hu, a lame monk who had just returned from a pilgrimage. He told Tugen that when passing through Mount Bronze Bull he found Ho Ahsi very ill.

Tugen was dissatisfied with Ho Ahsi's ways, but he was his master after all. And besides, he still had much to learn from him. When he thought about Ahsi's lonely, poor life, he felt really sorry for him.

So, learning of his illness, he lighted a lantern and went directly to see him. He took with him a handful of rice and an old cotton-padded jacket.

The wind howled and seemed to be peeling the skin from his face. He could hardly stand it. Little avalanches of snow kept falling on him, covering him almost completely, but he trudged on, braving the north wind as he headed straight for Mount Bronze Bull.

Finally, fairly exhausted, he arrived at Guandi Temple and went directly to Ahsi's sickbed, forgetting all else.

He had not seen his master for quite a few days. Ahsi's face was now the frightful colour of beeswax. Blood oozed from the corners of his mouth. Lifting the tattered cotton quilt, he saw Ahsi's whole body was swollen.

He helped him into the padded jacket he had brought and then cooked a panful of porridge which he fed him with a spoon while sitting on the edge of his bed.

After swallowing a few mouthfuls of porridge Ho Ahsi coughed up some blood. He did not open his eyes until after eating a few more mouthfuls. Then he glanced at Tugen.

Tugen wiped the sick old man's face with a napkin.

"Master, why didn't you tell me you were sick?"

Ho Ahsi's mouth twitched a little and tears rolled from his withered eyes. He blinked and said faintly with great effort:

"Tugen . . . you . . . are extremely . . . kind to me. I've lived . . . a tramp . . . all my life . . . no home . . . no kin. . . ."

Ahsi began to cough violently, his face contorted. He seemed to be in extreme agony.

"I'm dying . . . Tugen. . . ."

Ho Ahsi spat blood again, then told Tugen to untie the parcel under his bed and take out all the medicinal herbs. He taught Tugen the properties and uses of the herbs in detail. Then he asked him to repeat his teachings word for word. Tugen did very well, though he seemed at one point on the verge of tears. Then he managed a smile and continued:

"My good lad, at the back of the . . . room, under the . . . stove

in a jar . . . there's a book. . . . Bring it here. You . . . can read it, learn it by heart. Be . . . careful . . . never. . . ."

Ho Ahsi could not finish. Fits of coughing brought up a lot of blood, his eyes closed, both arms extended, and he breathed his last. Tugen called his name again and again but there was no answer, and soon his hands were deathly cold.

Tugen cried bitterly for a long time. Then at daybreak he went to the back of the room to fetch the book.

It was hand-copied on yellow paper which was turning black with the years. Inside were samples of every medicinal herb with explanations on its use. This was actually the secret record handed down to Ahsi by his ancestors. As he was illiterate, he kept it in a jar.

Unfortunately, after the long period of storage more than half of the pages had rotted in the damp jar. Worms had taken their toll, and a gust of wind blew it out of Tugen's hands like snow flakes.

Tugen picked up every small bit carefully and held them at his breast.

Ho Ahsi was being buried when the Kuomintang regime collapsed, and beautiful red flags made their appearance high over the village.

Cold winter had gone, spring came and flowers bloomed. Zhang Tugen, like the rest of the peasants, welcomed spring and Liberation with all his heart.

Ho Ahsi had passed away, and now Zhang Tugen was the only doctor around who could cure snakebite. Unlike treating a cold or a cough, dealing with snakebite was to wrest the victim from the jaws of death. The least mistake could cause irretrievable loss. The responsibility was great, especially for a lad still in his teens.

Uncle Shun Fu returned to the village. Appointed Party secretary and magistrate for the county, he had come to set up the county government. He was extremely busy with his new work, but remembered to send for Zhang Tugen for a talk.

"Tugen, Ho Ahsi is gone. You should take up his work. You may not be so practised as he, but you can learn."

Zhang Tugen was a determined young lad and now had all the encouragement he needed. But who would consult him? On the verge of death, who would be willing to trust a green-horn?

Tugen was having lunch at home one day after working in the wheat field when Uncle Shun Fu rushed over to see him.

"Tang Benho of Golden Rooster Peak was bitten by a snake. He's in a bad way. Will you go and try to save him?" requested the new Party secretary.

Tugen put down his bowl and went straight to Golden Rooster Peak.

It was about a three-mile walk, and Tugen walked quickly. Tang Benho was on the bed moaning and scarcely conscious. The victim had been in such pain that he had torn his padded jacket and chewed the edge of the reed mat on his bed to ribbons.

Tang's wife, a child tied to her back, was sobbing and begging someone to carry her husband to town for treatment.

Tugen was in a difficult position. Would they consent to his treating the patient at home? Then suppose he failed to save him? He would be responsible for the death. Or, his father might be blamed, since he knew his father and Tang were at odds. He was almost ready to advise taking the patient to the town for treatment.

Just then Tang called out deliriously:

"Please! Save my life! . . ."

The victim's agony made Tugen think again. "I want to be a doctor and cure snakebite. My duty is to save people's lives. Why should I consider any 'consequences'? Feeling somewhat ashamed of himself, he lifted the quilt and inspected the wound. Tang was bitten by the *Fangsi*, an extremely venomous variety. The bite was sure to be fatal as it was on a main vein. Tugen calculated the time: it would take no less than eight or nine hours to get to the town, nearly ninety *li* away. Tang Benho's lips had already turned purple. The snake's venom would soon reach his heart and he would be done for. Tugen explained the situation plainly to the patient's wife, who stared at the teenage doctor in disbelief. Her eyes red she said:

"Can you take up this case? It's not easy!"



Tugen again emphasized the danger of delay. Tang's wife really didn't know what to do and could only weep.

At that point Tang cried out in his pain:

"Oh! What torture! What torture! . . ."

Tugen knew the pain of snakebite, and Tang's cry seemed to him like his own. He forgot all the odds against him and announced:

"Trust me. I'm sure I can save his life!"

Certainly no mature doctor would promise a cure so definitely.

And as Tang's wife could find no better way she finally agreed to let Tugen treat her husband.

Zhang Tugen examined the wound again carefully, then felt the patient's pulse. It was still regular though weak. Suitable treatment within three hours might save his life. Longer delay would be dangerous. Tugen recalled his teacher's words: "To treat the bite of a *Fangsi* snake, the best medicine to apply is Seven-leaf Flower." But did that herb grow on the hills nearby? Time was life. Tugen had once seen five saplings of Seven-leaf Flower growing on Phoenix Peak. Better go the seven miles and see. He might be able to make it back in three hours. He would try. After taking his leave he set out for Phoenix Peak.

He ran as fast as he could over the mountain paths, which were craggy and stony and lined on both sides with thorns and thistles. April was still cold in the mountains, but though Tugen had taken off his coat and was in his shirt sleeves, he was still sweating all over.

Tugen had been right. He found the Seven-leaf Flower, pulled up three of the five plants and quickly ran back.

Quite unexpectedly when passing through his own village he met his father, who had heard that his son had gone to Golden Rooster Peak to treat Tang Benho. He stopped Tugen saying:

"My son, why are you so silly as to attend an enemy of ours. Don't you want to defend your father's honour?"

"But Father, how can we look on while someone is dying?" And Tugen ran on.

"Let someone else treat him! Come back at once!" Tugen's father started running after him, but was soon left far behind.

Tang Benho's family were astonished when Tugen arrived back. "Forty *li* of mountain paths in two and a half hours!" they exclaimed.

They had been saying while he was gone:

"It'll take at least four hours to go forty *li*."

"And if he can't find the medicinal herb there, it will all be for nothing!"

"It's just an excuse. He can't cure Tang and he's run away."

But Zhang Tugen set to work at once compounding the Seven-leaf Flower into a medicinal paste which he applied to the wound.

Soon the black blisters on the wound grew less and the swelling eased. The villagers felt relieved to see that Tang's life might be saved and they went back to the fields.

Still the patient was unconscious, his pulse weak. Tugen knew that Tang was still in danger and he was worried.

Some medicine was needed, but Tang's wife had no money left and Tugen had come in a hurry and had brought none. It was five *li* to a pharmacy in town. Tugen's feet were badly blistered. Tang's wife had a child to tend. Who could go for medicine? Tugen thought for a while and then said to Tang's wife:

"Auntie, how about borrowing some money and sending someone to town for medicine?"

Tang's wife stood up and bit her lip in hesitation.

Everyone was out in the fields except old people and children:

"Who'll go to town for me? I don't know where I can get the money either," she muttered aloud.

Then someone answered loudly from outside:

"I can go to town! I've got the money, too!"

The owner of the voice opened the door and came into the room, much to Tugen's and Tang's wife's surprise. It was none other than Tugen's father, his face flushed in embarrassment.

He had followed Tugen all the way to Golden Rooster Peak, had hesitated at Tang's door, peeped through a hole in the window paper and been touched to see Tang in such agony. His son's efforts to save the snakebite victim moved him deeply. He forgot his quarrel with

Tang Benho over a few sticks of firewood and was even willing to pay for his medicine.

The medicine was procured and taken, but the patient remained unconscious. Six o'clock, seven o'clock, eight . . . he still did not come to his senses.

Tugen went supperless, just kept pacing the room like an ant on a hot stove. His father sat smoking, his face solemn.

Then something suddenly occurred to Tugen: Ho Ahsi had once mentioned that too thick an application of medicinal paste could hinder the passage of the poison. Immediately he removed about one-third of the paste from the wound.

At eleven o'clock the poison was expelled and Tang Benho gradually came to his senses.

Zhang Tugen sat by the patient's bedside through the night. His father sat with him, too.

The next day when Tugen was about to leave, Tang's wife handed him a red envelope containing ten dollars. Where had she got the money?

Of course Tugen refused it.

"My aim is to cure snakebite and save people's life. How can I accept money for it?" he said smiling.

When Tang Benho was able to sit up and talk, he shook hands warmly with Tugen's father. All the unpleasantness of the past was forgotten.

After Zhang Tugen had saved Tang Benho from certain death, Uncle Shun Fu, now the county Party secretary, praised his deed in an article in the local newspaper. From then on Tugen was well known for curing snakebite, and people called on him from far and wide for help.

Once after returning from a training class in town, he himself fell ill, was dizzy, feverish, and aching all over so that he was confined to bed.

He had just taken an antipyretic and was wrapped in a blanket, ready to sweat it out. The weather was hot, and he was really ex-

hausted. Suddenly he heard his mother talking with a man outside his door.

"... I'm from Hojia'ao. I've come for the doctor," said the man.

"Oh, that's too bad! He's ill with a high fever and hasn't eaten anything for three days," came his mother's voice.

The man was obviously disappointed, but he went on with a sigh.

"What a pity! The victim is a girl of twelve. Her parents are fighting in Korea. What am I to do?"

Tugen's mother suggested to the worried stranger:

"There are six snakebite doctors in the village. All have been trained by Tugen. Why not see one of them?"

The man hesitated. "I'm afraid it's no use and she will die. Her toes have already turned black. It was a Five Step that bit her..."

Tugen pushed his quilt aside. He recalled how Zhou Baoliu had rolled on the ground and died in agony. Would this 12-year-old be the same?

Hojia'ao was fifty *li* away. If the patient had not been in extreme danger they would never have come so far to fetch him. Tugen put on his coat and shoes, took his medicine case and silently felt his way out the back door. Then remembering he had left no word with his mother, and that she would be upset at his going out with a fever, he took a piece of charcoal and wrote on the wall near the back door:

"I've gone to Hojia'ao. Tugen."

The sun was already high in the sky when he left the village around 10 o'clock. He was troubled by the thought that no matter how fast he went he couldn't arrive earlier than noon.

Suddenly, he saw a bike under a tree. The straw hat hanging on its handle indicated it belonged to Uncle Shun Fu who was probably supervising the farm work in the area. Since the rice plants had already reached head high, Tugen couldn't see anybody around and nobody answered his shouts. Thinking it was more important to save a life than to waste any more time, he got on the bike and rode away.

Tugen's mother, meanwhile, on returning to her room, discovered her son missing. After looking around the house, she went to the back door where she saw the message on the wall. She wondered

how he, seriously ill, could travel fifty *li* on such a hot day. She ran to the fields to call her husband. But what could he do? Finally, they got a leather stretcher and headed off in a hurry to Hojia'ao.

After quite a long walk, they met a worried Uncle Shun Fu sitting by a rock on the roadside. He had followed the tracks of his missing bike until he had lost them in an area of grassland.

When Tugen's father told him about his sick son's going to Hojia'ao, Shun Fu applauded his courage but also worried about his health.

He noticed Tugen's mother was carrying the stretcher. He objected:

"How can you carry such a heavy stretcher with small bound feet? You'd better go home. I'll take it for you!"

But she was not convinced.

"Uncle Shun Fu, you are an old man, it's all the same. . . ."

He cut her short.

"No. I'm well trained. Years ago the cooking utensils I carried were much heavier."

Forgetting about the problem of his bike, he took over the leather stretcher from Tugen's mother and hurried on with Tugen's father.

Zhang Tugen gritted his teeth as he pedalled along on the bike. He saw sparkles in the light and his head sang as if the sky were whirling and the mountains shaking. He found the bike difficult to steer on the narrow and uneven mountain path. He felt his back scorched by the blazing sun as the wind blew hot yellow sand into his face.

Finally Zhang Tugen reached a path leading uphill where he had to carry the bicycle on his shoulder. Holding on to the roadside pine trees for support, he climbed upward step by step.

Even a highly-skilled bicycle rider would have had trouble with the descent and Zhang Tugen — especially in illness — was not a good cyclist. As he picked up speed, the path in front of him seemed to waver back and forth like lanterns hung over the streets on Chinese New Year's Day. He saw the impending danger and pressed the brake, but he acted too late: both he and his bike fell and rolled

down the slope until they ended up in a creek at the foot of a hill.

Only when the cold water chilled him to the bone did Zhang Tugen realize he was half soaked. The bike was thrown into the middle of the creek, its steering handle twisted and a few wire spokes in its wheels broken. His medicine case hung on a tree branch above his head.

He sat up to examine himself. Luckily, he had only a few scratches. He washed away the dirt and blood and squeezed out the water from his pants. Then he retrieved his medicine case, picked up the damaged bike and crept out of the valley.

It was well past noon. People who attended the victim of the snakebite waited, worrying. But when the man sent for Zhang Tugen returned, he reported that Tugen was too ill to come. On hearing this, the girl's grandmother bent over the table and started to cry. People paced the room, trying to think of what to do.

Someone suggested carrying the girl to Zhang Tugen for treatment. Her grandma was afraid there might be danger along the way on such a long trip, but she couldn't think of anything else.

About this time, others spotted in the distance an approaching group carrying a leather stretcher, and those with the best eyesight could see that the county Party secretary was in the lead. They yelled in excitement:

"They've carried Zhang Tugen here!"

People rushed out to welcome them. Grandma wiped away her tears and raising her head, looked towards the people in the distance.

They came nearer and nearer. Then they arrived and laid down the stretcher — with nobody in it.

The two parties asked each other almost at the same time:

"Where's Zhang Tugen?"

What had happened? Everyone was terribly worried.

Fortunately, about this time Zhang Tugen arrived on the damaged bike.

He went straight to the snakebite victim. Seeing a girl with dark-green skin whose lips had turned black and swollen from the poison, Zhang Tugen was afraid that he'd arrived too late. He

quickly decided on a prescription and sent Uncle Shun Fu on his damaged bike to get the medicine. Meanwhile Tugen prepared a medicinal herb paste which he applied to the girl's wound. Some people in the room went to borrow a medicine pot while others went out to light the charcoal stove. The rest returned to work in the fields.

Only Grandma and Zhang Tugen were left in the room, Grandma fanned the sick girl, keeping away the flies. Zhang Tugen sat by the side of the bed, leaning on the wall and breathing heavily. He felt as if a stone rested on his chest. He looked around the room.

Beneath the portrait of Chairman Mao an award certificate for "triple-A" merits was posted. He learned from reading the certificate that the girl's name was Ho Lian, a fifth-grade student. On the window-sill lay her unfinished handiwork — a model locomotive. Her red scarf, with a yellow butterfly resting on it, lay in the window. By the door was the photograph of her parents. Her father, an army officer was holding a telescope. Her mother looked to be a medical worker, carrying a white case. Probably it was taken in Korea. They wore thick cotton-padded uniforms. On the desk were a few books sent from her father. One of them was "Huang Jiguang", another one was "Luo Shengjiao" and other war heroes.

While Zhang Tugen was turning the leaves of these books, Grandma suddenly yelled:

"What's wrong? What's happening to her?"

Turning around, Zhang Tugen saw that Ho Lian was in convulsions, foam at her mouth and her eyeballs turned upward. The poison had reached her heart.

Zhang Tugen opened his medicine-case for the syringe to draw out the poisonous fluid. He discovered all three syringes had been broken on the way.

What could he do? She couldn't die like this. He thought of her parents who had joined the Volunteer Forces. He thought of Huang Jiguang and Luo Shengjiao, heroes in the Volunteer Forces who had laid down their lives for the people. He thought of the encouragement Party leaders had given him when he attended the county training class. Then, he recalled the words spoken by Uncle Shun Fu just

before he left to get the medicine: "Tugen, be sure to save the child!" He bent down and sucked at the girl's wound.

Poison mingled with blood as it was sucked out mouthful by mouthful. Zhang Tugen knew he was being poisoned. He felt a burning fire inside his chest. He breathed with difficulty. After taking some herbal medicine, he turned to continue but his head seemed to blow up. He fell to the ground in a faint.

The frightened grandmother went outside and cried out:

"Help! Come quickly!"

People came from everywhere. Uncle Shun Fu, who had just returned, helped Tugen's father put Tugen in bed.

In his stupor, Zhang Tugen urged over and over:

"Draw out the poison! Apply the medicinal herb paste. . . ."

Uncle Shun Fu, Tugen's father, Grandma took turns drawing out the poison. Then they applied medicinal herb paste over the wound. Finally they gave the girl the liquid medicine.

Soon Ho Lian grew more calm.

Zhang Tugen did not come to until midnight. He understood well why everybody was standing around his bed.

Ho Lian had passed the most critical moment.

When Uncle Shun Fu told Tugen in a low voice that Ho Lian had come to herself again, he felt so happy that he burst out laughing.



## Xiao Quan's Sword

### *Jin Jin*

Xiao Quan's sword wasn't like the shiny steel ones in red scabbards which can be bought in toy shops. Still, though it wasn't so fancy, he cherished it, for he had spent almost half a day making it.

He had a simple reason for making a sword. When he first picked up the piece of wood from the yard, he thought what a wonderful sword he could make from it. For some time, he had had no weapon; his younger brother had stepped on and flattened the little rifle he'd bought on New Year's Day, and so — since it no longer functioned — he had given it to his brother. As a third-grade student he would be laughed at by his classmates if he were seen playing with such a beat-up rifle. Also, he could use a sword to go after the stray cat that had been jumping down from their roof into the yard to steal food. Once, the cat had snatched away a cleaned and dressed carp. He made the sword also to kill this detestable cat.

Working with only a pocketknife, he whittled out a sword with a sharp edge and point and wrapped the hilt with a piece of red cloth. It was a pity he didn't have any silver paint so that it would look even more gorgeous.

Xiao Quan ran out of the yard to play around the gate.

On the stone steps of the gate a classmate of his, Da Gui, was telling a story to her sister Xiao Gui and another boy Suoer who lived in the same compound with Xiao Quan. They were all sitting on the same step.

"What's going on?" asked Xiao Quan, as he seated himself on the step above them.

Glancing at the sword in Xiao Quan's hand, Da Gui continued

her story without pausing. "His left arm and shoulder were hit by the enemy's bullets. He fainted from loss of blood."

"Oh, I see! You're telling them that story," Xiao Quan interrupted. Although in the same grade, Xiao Quan and Da Gui had different teachers. Teacher Gu taught Da Gui in the first section; Teacher Wang taught Xiao Quan in the second section. Xiao Quan also had heard the story at school from his teacher.

Suoer, took Xiao Quan by the hand, and asked excitedly, "Xiao Quan, do you also know this story?"

Angry, Da Gui snapped at her audience of three listeners: "Are you intending to hear the story? If not, I'll stop right away!"

"Yes, we want to hear the story!" Xiao Gui and Suoer burst out almost at the same time.

"Then, don't be so noisy!"

Knowing the story himself, Xiao Quan wanted to slip off. But finally he stayed until the end just to find out whether or not she would make any mistake in her narration so he could point out that he was really much smarter than she.

Da Gui continued: "After a while, the pain brought him back to consciousness. Although he couldn't crawl, he raised his right hand and threw a grenade. Boom! It exploded like an earthquake, flames and black smoke rising high in the air. In the deafening noise, he lost consciousness again."

As Xiao Gui knew nothing about earthquakes, she wanted to ask some questions about this part of the story but recalling her sister's warning, she decided not to disturb her and kept listening attentively.

"When he regained his senses, the enemy's machine-gun was still firing. He gritted his teeth. He was determined to destroy the enemy's machine-gun fortifications but he had no grenades left. Suddenly he stood up, ran to the enemy's fort and blocked up the muzzle of the machine-gun with his chest. The enemy's machine-gun stopped firing. Our armed units dashed forward! Forward! They wiped out the enemy on top of the hill. It's estimated over 200 American devils were killed."

Xiao Quan felt the story had been well told without any mistake.

But he was not satisfied because Da Gui had recited it in a way which exactly imitated Teacher Gu.

"Oh! If I guess right," he said, "you're telling the story about Huang Jiguang, the war hero. We already heard that story from our teacher a long time ago."

"Da Gui, is Huang dead?" asked Xiao Gui.

Xiao Quan didn't give Da Gui a chance to answer but spoke up in a loud voice, as if he were an eyewitness: "Of course, he's dead! He was so brave! Only Matelsov could excel him in bravery!"

"Who's Matelsov?" Xiao Gui asked.

"Matelsov was a war hero in the Soviet Union. He fought the Germans with the same bravery," answered Da Gui. She pulled her braids from over the back of her ears, unfastened the rubber bands that tied them and rebraided her hair.

Suoer looked pained. "Da Gui, it would be great if he still lived," he said.

Straightening her back, imitating her teacher's manner and speech, Da Gui said: "According to Teacher Gu, a hero who's dead does not really die. He is still living in our hearts, always to be remembered. Would this be the same if he were still alive?"

Xiao Quan stood up and sat down next to Suoer. He disagreed with Da Gui: "He's dead! How could he be still living? Teacher Wang explained it differently. She said that we must follow Huang's good example, love our country with an ardent zeal and be good children of Chairman Mao. She never remarked that he's still alive."

Da Gui responded with such force she almost jumped up: "Who said he was? Teacher Gu didn't say that he's still living. She said that he's still living in our hearts. You didn't catch the meaning, yet you'd like to criticize others!"

Xiao Quan really didn't consider that Teacher Gu was wrong but, after all, he felt that her explanation wasn't as good as Teacher Wang's.

"Next Thursday when we hold a branch meeting of the Young Pioneers, we're going to ask Teacher Wang to tell us some stories. She is a wonderful story-teller," said Xiao Quan.

Suoer was fondling the hilt of the sword. On hearing there was going to be a story-telling, he said, "Xiao Quan, after you hear her story, please tell it to us, OK?"

"I want to hear it too!" said Xiao Gui.

"Of course, I'll tell you the story but you have to wait till a week after next Sunday. Next Sunday I'm going to see Grandma."

Da Gui listened, displeased. She hated to hear Teacher Gu gossiped about and compared unfavourably. To her, Teacher Gu was the No. One teacher. "Is teacher Wang the only one who tells wonderful stories?" she asked. "Isn't Teacher Gu a good story-teller?"

"Pooh! Your teacher!"

"Teacher Gu tells stories better, several million times better than Teacher Wang!"

"Better? How could she possibly tell stories better?" asked Xiao Quan in a disapproving tone.

Da Gui stood up, staring in anger at Xiao Quan. "You'd like to hear her, but you are not allowed to!" she said.

"Ridiculous! Even if you begged me to come, I wouldn't," said Xiao Quan.

"Don't talk like that!" Da Gui pushed Xiao Quan.

Unprepared for this attack Xiao Quan leaned backward and almost fell down. "You hit me!"

"I haven't yet. But if you speak ill of Teacher Gu, I will."

Xiao Quan and Da Gui stood face to face. If either raised a hand, there would be a fight.

Suoer and Xiao Gui were stunned. They also stood up. Xiao Gui shouted, "Sister, don't fight!"

Xiao Quan laughed, pretending not to care. "If you hit me, I'll cut your head off," he said, drawing out his sword, he brushed it across Da Gui's coat collar.

Da Gui seized the sword, first with one hand, then with both.

This, Xiao Quan hadn't expected. He also grabbed the sword with both hands, "Let go!"

"No!"

"You won't give it up?"

"No!"

Both Xiao Quan and Da Gui held the sword tightly. Nobody would give in.

"I'm going to tell Granny that sister is fighting!" Xiao Gui ran into the yard, followed by Suoer.

Xiao Quan tried to break Da Gui's grip but she only held on tighter.

"Let go, please!" Xiao Quan almost begged. Then, on second thought, he again became demanding: "This is my sword, let go!"

"Who told you to hit people with swords?"

"I only touched you. Nobody hit you."

"Only a touch? You tried to scare me with the sword! Do you think you can scare me?"

"Let go!"

"I'll let go if you promise to behave yourself."

It didn't take Xiao Quan long to reply: "No, I won't."

"Then, I won't let go."

Xiao Quan pulled the sword back to his side, and Da Gui pulled it to her side. Da Gui moved down a step and Xiao Quan followed her. Gradually, they moved to the ground, both holding fast to the sword.

"Are you fighting? You naughty kids!" Xiao Quan's mother approached from the yard.

Xiao Quan became desperate. He tried to snatch the sword quickly from Da Gui, and as he did so, "Snap!" the sword broke in two. Xiao Quan held the hilt while Da Gui had the other half in her hand.

When Xiao Quan's mother reached them she saw the two kids, each holding half a sword, standing face to face with each other. "You're quarrelling again! You get along well for a few days and then you get cross again. What's going on?"

Xiao Quan barely heard his mother as he looked at the broken sword in his hand. He was on the verge of bursting into tears. Then he threw the hilt on the ground. "Pay me back for my sword! Pay me back for my sword!"

Da Gui threw the other half of the sword on the ground, "Pay you back? You never admitted your wrong and you want me to pay you?"

"I want you to pay! There's no way out!" So saying, he turned and ran to the yard, heading straight for Da Gui's house. On his way, it occurred to him that Da Gui's mother might not be home from the office yet, but it was meaningless to turn back. His mother followed behind him.

Da Gui sat down in a pout, trimming a fingernail. She felt a little sorry about their quarrel. But she blamed Xiao Quan for looking down on Teacher Gu.

Xiao Gui approached her sister and said, "I've already told Granny you've been quarrelling with people."

"Who told you to tell Granny? If you did, I won't tell you stories any more."

Xiao Gui smiled. "Next time, Xiao Quan is going to tell us stories."

Da Gui felt rather alone. Instead of going home, she resumed her seat on the stone step.

Suoer picked up the pieces of the sword from the ground to try to fix it, but he couldn't. Xiao Gui came to his assistance. "Suoer, why don't we wrap them up with a piece of cloth and then tie them up with thread?"

"Good! Let me go fetch some cloth." And Suoer was off and running to his house.

"Suoer, don't forget to bring some thread, too." Xiao Gui shouted from behind.

\* Xiao Quan squatted under a date tree in the yard. The bare branches of the tree trembled in the cold winter breeze, quite indifferent to Xiao Quan's worries.

The next afternoon when Xiao Quan passed by Da Gui's doorway, he saw her sitting on the threshold, trying to sharpen a piece of wooden board with a cleaver. The frame of a sword had been fashioned out but it had not been smoothed out or sharpened. Xiao Quan stopped to look.

Da Gui continued to work without looking up. The cleaver was so dull and heavy that she handled it with difficulty as she twisted it, trying to carve the wood.

Xiao Quan felt hurt. "First you break my sword, then you make yourself one."

Da Gui remained silent. She was sharpening the head of the sword. She almost cut her finger at a slip of the cleaver.

Xiao Quan felt quite uneasy about her way of sharpening wood. "How can you sharpen it like that? Do it this way." He took the sword from her, pulled out his pocketknife and, opening the blade, started to work. Da Gui stood behind Xiao Quan, watching attentively as he worked.

The sword was soon smooth and narrow, just like the one he had before. He handed it to Da Gui. "Well, it's done. Take it," he said.

"This is for you! I don't care for it," She said.

"For me? You made the sword, you take it." Xiao Quan pressed it into her hands.

Refusing, Da Gui put her hands behind her. "I have paid you back. Just take it!"

Xiao Quan saw that this sword was really marvellous: the timber in it was much better than in the one he'd made himself. He thought: well, it's all right. But, thinking further, he felt it unfair to take the sword away from her since she'd worked hard to make it. "I really don't want to take it away from you since you made it."

"I promised to give it to you, now just take it," Da Gui said in a firm tone.

Xiao Quan bowed his head and said shyly: "Yesterday I was in the wrong, and I told Teacher Wang all about it."

Da Gui pretended to have behaved well, too. "I've told Teacher Gu too. She said that we must pay respect to every teacher we meet."

Xiao Quan quickly forgot all about their quarrel. Looking at the timber in the sword, he asked: "Da Gui, where did you find this wood?"

"I found it in Granny's room."

"Any more left?"

"There's plenty!" Da Gui stretched out her arms to make a gesture. "There's a large pile like this!"

"Can't Granny give you more?"

"Certainly! I've asked her permission before."

"Da Gui, why don't you go ask Granny to give you another piece of wood so I can make you a sword?"

"But I don't care for this sort of toy."

"How about making one each for Suoer and Xiao Gui?"

"Good! I'll go fetch the wood!" Da Gui ran to Granny's room.

Xiao Quan took out his knife and started working. He tried to make the blade even sharper.







# My Search for the Red Army

*Lu Yanzhou*

My father was a Red Armyman who was wounded in the leg and fell behind the main troops. My mother and I, too, lost track of the Red Guards during an attack by the white bandits in their mountain offensive. Finally, our family was reunited after an elderly man whom we met told us that Father was living in a cave on the Yellow Grass Lowland of the Lotus Flower Mountains. We found him there after a separation of three months — ever since the Whites had launched an attack against the revolutionary base area.

I was only nine years old.

At first we got along all right. In February, when the sun rose, it warmed the grass lowland. I ran about everywhere in the long grass which was as tall as a man, digging some wild vegetable or bamboo roots out of the ground with a slate. Sometimes, I would see a squirrel, winking at me with tiny sparkling eyes from the tree branches. I would hide myself behind a tree, imitating its chirp to tease it. Sometimes, when the old man from down the hill made his way over for a visit, like a little sentinel on duty, I would jump out from the grass and shout, "Who's there!" After giving him this start, I would run up and hug him. "My little fox! Show me the way to your father!" And so he would give me a ride on his back to the cave.

But later the situation turned for the worse.

The old man failed to appear for five or six days. The sound of gunfire came from down the hill. During the day, smoke could be seen rising from below and the wind brought an irritating burning smell. We could see flames and heard cries throughout the night. My father's face turned deathly pale. Mother held me tight in her arms,

her face touching my head gently.

"White dogs! The day will come when we'll settle scores with you!" she said.

We had had nothing to eat for a couple of days. Mother put a few wild vegetables in a broken porcelain bowl and gave it to Father. After looking into the bowl for a moment, he turned to me and said, "Xiao Gu, help yourself."

I was about to when I recalled that Father had just recovered from his wound and needed nourishment. "Daddy, I'm not hungry!" I said.

Mother stroked my face fondly. "Xiao Gu, you must go to sleep. Here, rest your head in my lap. Tomorrow, when the White bandits are gone, I'll take you to Granny's house for peanut candy, eggs and a big bowl of eggs and noodles."

Mother coaxed me like a three-year-old. She took from her pocket an old brass coin and gave it to me. She promised to make a shuttlecock for me the next day. I knew she was trying to coax me to sleep. She patted me gently and murmured something I couldn't quite hear as I forgot my grumbling empty stomach and became drowsy.

Before I fell asleep I heard Father say to Mother: "Having no food is nothing compared to what will happen if we lose contact with the organization. . . . We must find our Party and the Red Army." I heard Mother say, "I'll go downhill tomorrow." As they went on talking I fell sound asleep. I had many dreams, I dreamed the Red Army-men were back. They put me on their laps and taught me to sing: "The cassia blossoms are blooming everywhere in August; the red flags and banners are waving high. . . ." I dreamed the youngsters in the Children's League allowed me to stand guard. After we caught a wild deer, we made a fire by the riverside and roasted it till the air was filled with a sweet aroma. Then, came Chairman Wang, many elder sisters, aunts and Red Army-men. We sang and ate together. . . .

Suddenly, a noise awakened me. Opening my eyes, I saw Mother stuffing the cave with straw. Father had gone somewhere. Outside a violent wind was howling and blowing into the cave. Mountain and valley were shaken.

When Motehr saw me up, she put her shabby cotton-padded jacket on my shoulders. "Xiao Gu, go and find your daddy!" she said.

"Where is he?"

"He went to dig up some grass roots. When you see him, tell him to come back. You both should stay in the cave. Meanwhile, I'll go down the mountain and be back soon."

"Mama, take me with you," I said, taking her hand.

"No! You can't go. Go fetch your father quickly!"

I climbed out of the cave. Scarcely had I walked more than a few steps when I heard rustling sounds. I saw across the way numerous White bandits with guns in their hands, trotting like wolves, their bodies slightly crouched. I squatted in the underbrush wondering whether to run back when suddenly I saw my father slip into the bamboo grove. The Whites fired after him. "There's a Communist. Catch him alive!"

I was shocked. The Whites had encircled the bamboo grove and were firing everywhere. At my wit's end, I grabbed a rock, threw it at one of the Whites and then turned on my heels and ran towards the east.

"Here he is! Here he is!" I heard the enemy shout behind me as they gave chase. I slipped headlong into a needle shrub and stayed there without moving. The enemy passed by me. I don't know how long I stayed there. At first, I could hear firing and voices. Finally I heard nothing but the wind whistling through the trees.

I pushed aside the needle branches and peeped outside. Dark thick clouds rolled in the sky in a violent wind which scattered the dead leaves on the ground. Looking downhill, I could see nothing. I carefully made my way to our cave. I was startled to see that the straw used to shield against the wind at the entrance had been thrown aside. Inside the cave our cotton pad had been torn into pieces, pitchers broken, and the straw used as a mattress was strewn about and stained with blood. . . .

I rushed out of the cave, crying and yelling: "Mama! Daddy!" I ran about aimlessly over every nook of the hill, calling loudly,

"Mama! Daddy!"

My voice was broken and choked by the wind but I kept on shouting. The whistling wind and the echoes from the ravines were the only answer.

I didn't know how long I had run until I tripped over a vine, tumbled to the ground and fainted.

I was awakened by falling snow. Not far from me, a leopard roared. It was pitch dark, and in my cold and hunger, I didn't know where to go. I wiped my nose with my sleeve. I tried but was too weak to get up. Tears welled in my eyes. Where was my mother? Where was my father?

Finally I strained every nerve to stand up with the help of a tiny tree. But where was I going? I decided to go back again to the cave to see if my parents were waiting for me there. If I couldn't find them, I would head south where the Red Army was advancing.

I dumbled along for only a few steps when I saw a pair of dark green lights shining in the dark. With a roar, a spotted leopard leapt past me. I was scared out of my wits, and grabbed hold of a pine tree to help support my trembling leg. I murmured to myself:

"Leopard! Leopard! I'm looking for Daddy and Mama! Don't scare me like that. . . ." I waited for a long time, listening. Snow was falling all over the hill. But the leopard was gone.

I plucked up my courage and continued to run forward until I reached the cave. It was pitch dark inside. My legs were almost paralyzed with fear. I called out in a trembling voice: "Daddy! Mama!"

The cave echoed back my words. I called again. There was no reply. Fumbling blindly along the wall, I inched my way into the cave, bumping my head against the wall. If only Mother were here she would hold me in a warm embrace, but there was no one.

I sat on the straw. My parents used to admire my cleverness but by then I had turned into a wooden doll, unable to think or move. I took out the copper coin Mother gave me and put it in my mouth, sucking on it unconsciously.

But suddenly I heard someone call my name. At first I thought my ears were tricking me, but the voice, though indistinct, came nearer and nearer, "Xiao Gu! Xiao Gu!"

It was my father! I groped my way out of the cave. The voice came from above my head. Turning round, I saw a shadow gliding down from a rock. I rubbed my eyes to see more clearly.

"Daddy!" I cried.

Father jumped down. His legs and hands were trembling as he held me to him. "My boy!" he said and was silent. My face touched his, which, I felt, was damp yet hot.

"Where's Mama?" I asked.

Father made no reply. Seized both by terror and anxiety, I urged him again and again for an answer. Suddenly Father burst out: "Your mother was arrested by the enemy!"

So it was Mother's blood that stained the straw in the cave. . . . I started to cry and clung to my father.

"My son, we can't stay here any more! Let's go."

"Where? Daddy! Shall we go to find the Red Army?"

"That's right! We must find them. For without the Red Army, your father cannot live and your mother cannot be avenged. Without the Red Army, revolution cannot win and the poor people cannot be emancipated."

"Daddy, let's go quickly! But where's the Red Army?"

"We're sure to find them anyway, my child! Do remember the blood debt. . . ."

"Yes, Daddy? I'll never forget."

I stopped crying. We talked while walking, braving the heavy snow. As we walked down the Lotus Flower Mountains, we were covered all over with snow, the melted snow running down our backs from our necks. Our lips were dark with cold.

The day dawned after we had walked twenty or thirty *li*.

On our way, we didn't see any local people nor did we encounter any Whites. Sometimes, we saw piles of corpses in the snow. Some of the people who had been killed were hung on trees. At this dread-

ful sight, I took hold of Father's jacket corner, hiding behind him, too timid to move on. When Father saw this, he said, "Xiao Gu! Don't be afraid! You must learn to hate."

Still I felt afraid. Daddy asked me, "Xiao Gu! Who killed those uncles and aunts?"

"The White bandits."

"Who arrested your mother?"

"The White bandits."

"Don't you hate these Whites?"

"Yes, I do."

"If you do hate them, you shouldn't be afraid. Now, my son! Take off your hat."

Seeing Daddy had already taken off his hat, I did the same. Daddy dropped the hand which held the hat, so I also let down my hands.

"Xiao Gu! Just repeat what I say!"

I nodded.

Father, glancing at the dead, said: "We must find the Red Army!"

"We must find the Red Army!" I repeated.

"Avenge our country folks!"

"Avenge our country folks!"

"We must smash the old world which has nursed the Whites!"

"We must smash the old world which has nursed the Whites!"

"Now, are you still in fear?" asked Father, turning back to me.

"No, not a bit!" said I.

"Come on, let's tend to the dead," said Father. We found an old straw mattress to place over their bodies. Father went forward in silence. I limped behind.

We hadn't eaten for several days. Even worse, because of the icy cold weather, my hands and feet were frozen through and ached terribly. If I had been with my mother, I would have begged her to take a little rest. But, with my father, I feared his temper. Before he joined the revolution, his family had lived in starvation. When the local tyrant sent his rent collector to him for the rent, my father smacked



him on the face without much talk. At the time of the revolt, he rushed into the tyrant's house alone, killing his three guards with a pole. Mother was the only person who dared to contradict him. All my uncles were scared of him. He was a man of few but careful words. After he joined the Red Army, he kept his temper better. Still I was in fear of him. I also knew Father hadn't eaten anything either and that his injured legs had not quite recovered. With all his heart, Father intended to find the Red Army, and so did I. We walked on.

Suddenly a village with more than twenty inhabitants came in view. Father came to a stop, pointing to a little isolated house in front of the village: "Xiao Gu! This house seems to be inhabited by the country folks. Why don't we put up there for a moment? We can't go on in broad daylight. In case we run into the Whites, how can we resist them?"

This was what I hoped Father would say. How wonderful it would be if we could go into a room to sit by the fire and eat some roasted potatoes or drink some rice soup!

But as we approached the house, Father suddenly held me back and hushed me into silence. I pushed myself against the wall. Father crouched with his ear against the door. From the crack in the wall, I peeped into the room. An oil lamp was casting a gloomy light on the wall where an empty pistol case was hanging.

"A pistol!" I was about to speak when Father covered up my mouth, waving his hand over my face to show me to keep quiet.

Father scratched his head and murmured: "What's the matter? Is this a location of the enemy?" He took me to a shelter a little distance from the house. Then he made a stroll around the house. On turning back, he touched his chin thoughtfully. The village was not far away, all was silent.

"Kill him!" Father said to himself. "These bastards make me mad! They think all our army men are gone!"

"Xiao Gu, do you want a pistol?"

"A pistol!"

"Yes, if we have a pistol, we can fight the Whites when we happen to meet them." He led me to the house. Pointing to a hole by

the side of the door stuffed with straw, he said: "The bastard has bolted the door from inside. Can you crawl through this hole and open the door?"

"Yes, Daddy!" I said, although the hole looked rather small.

"Good! Don't make a noise to disturb the bastard!" He showed me how to lift the bolt by first inspecting it to see whether or not there was a hidden latch on the bolt. Then he squatted down to pull the straw out of the hole. I stood by, afraid but trying to collect my courage by remembering the words: "Xiao Gu, don't be afraid but learn to hate."

Father took off my jacket, and I put my head into the hole. There were two adjacent rooms. A lamp was lit in the inner room. I could barely make out a table set with bowls and wine cups in the outer room. Without waiting for me to take a more careful look, Father gave me a shove from behind and I squeezed into the house.

By the dim light of the lamp, I could see the bolt on the door which was about my height. I lost no time. My only intention was to open the door quickly so that Father might come in to kill the bastard.

I leaned on the door and as soon as I touched it, I found a secret latch on the bolt, just as Father had mentioned. I took it off and with a gentle push the bolt lifted. Father must have been listening on the outside, for just as I lifted up the bolt, he pushed the door open a crack. The man sleeping in bed made a turn. Father darted into the room and in a flash jumped in front of the man's bed, reached under his pillow and pulled out a pistol. Aiming at the man in the bed, Father said in a low voice: "Don't move!"

A bald head appeared out from under the cotton quilt.

"Oh, it is you — Song the Bald Head!" Father's eyes opened wide, shining with anger. Snatching a cleaver from in front of the fireplace, he made one fatal stroke at the bald head. The man fell without a sound.

As I stood by the door watching my father kill the enemy, I felt happy. This was the first time I had been an eyewitness to my father's skill which I had heard about.

We latched the door from inside, then ran five or six *li* in one

breath. Although we were cold and hungry, we felt more animated because we had performed a great deed.

On our way Father told me that Song the Bald Head was a subordinate officer of the reactionary civil league who was guilty of all kinds of crimes and who had killed many innocent country folks. He had occupied this small house for his dirty work. Not only did we capture a pistol but we also eliminated a source of harm.

At daybreak, we hid behind a rock. No sooner had I sat down than I fell fast asleep. In my dreams I saw the Red Armymen and my mother who was sewing for them.

I don't know how long I slept before Father pushed me awake. I rubbed my eyes to see Father had cooked over a fire seven or eight edible bamboo shoots he'd got from somewhere. It was growing dark outside. The snow had died out but thick clouds had gathered in the sky.

"Xiao Gu! Help yourself! They're crisp, hot and delicious!"

I put one in my mouth. It tasted better than chestnuts.

"We have to proceed on our journey, my son!" Father reminded me while we were eating. I nodded.

"We've got to find reliable country folks to depend upon. Away from them, we would be blind like headless flies going nowhere!" Father continued. He now seemed to regard me as a grown-up to talk things over with. Though I was completely in the dark, I nodded, feeling important.

We set out as it was getting dark. The road was frozen and slippery. Within one *li*'s distance, I fell several times. I could walk better only when Father tied a tiny bit of straw on my shoes.

We hadn't gone far when someone in front of us yelled: "Who's that?"

We both were startled. By the light of the white snow, we saw several men who stood in front of a shed by the road suddenly dash forward towards us with guns in their hands.

Father gave me a pull, and we both slipped down a slope into a low marshy land. My head was scratched in several places by thorns.

The blood that ran down my face froze in the cold wind. But I dared not complain but struggled with a limp to follow Father. Above us the Whites yelled out: "We see you! Come out!"

Father and I flattened ourselves against a stone wall, motionless. Their attempt to trick us into coming out didn't fool us. Finally, they went away.

Father said we had two routes in front of us to choose from: the small path from where we had just come which was blocked and another path which, though broader, was even harder to get through.

Father was worried. He took out the pistol from his jacket and played with it for a while. After putting it back he said: "Let's go straight uphill, my son!"

"Uphill?"

Without making a reply Father took me by the hand and started climbing away from the pathways. We crossed over a rise in the hill and saw about half way up seven or eight homes scattered here and there. In the centre stood a spacious house, lighted with lamps. On top of the hill, the enemy patrolled.

"Too bad the enemy's here," said Father, "but let's go up further."

"Daddy," I murmured with a mournful voice and sat down right away. It wasn't that I was unwilling to go on, but I couldn't take another step, so badly swollen were my feet. When I touched them, they had no feeling. Father, after examining my feet, looked at me without a word. He then looked over at the old house which was nearest to us. The courtyard walls were half crumbled down. There was no light in the house.

Father left me and headed that direction, soon to disappear into a bamboo grove. After a while, I felt uneasy. Should Father encounter the Whites, what could he do? The more I thought, the more worried I got. I couldn't wait any longer, so, I unfolded my sleeves to cover up my hands and crept along following Father's path.

Finally, I came to the door of the house. I overheard an old woman talking to Daddy. "Good Heavens," she said, "I'm glad to

see you again. When will the Red Army be back? My sons, my sons-in-law were. . . ." Her words were choked with sobbing.

"Aunty, don't be so sad! The days of the reactionaries are numbered," I heard my father say, trying to console her.

"Are you alone?" asked Granny.

"I was left behind because I was wounded. My wife was captured by the enemy, and I'm not sure whether she's still alive. My son is with me."

"Good Heavens! Where is he? Oh! What a world!"

When I heard this, I crawled to the door, crying: "Daddy! Daddy!"

The door opened quickly. The room was lit by an oil lamp. The windows were stuffed tightly so that no light could be seen from outside.

The old woman took me in her arms and held me. "Oh, my poor child! You're freezing!" she said over and over.

We knew we couldn't stay long. The old woman told Father that all the roads were blocked by the enemy. Villagers had been organized and put into a Reformation Camp. Every day, the mountains were raided and innocent people killed. The old woman knew nothing about the whereabouts of the Red Army, the guerrillas or the Red Guards.

Since there was not any clue to be traced, Father got the worst of it in his old wound, so he decided to stay for the time being. At midnight, the old woman gave us some grain, a preserved deer leg, a broken basin which could serve as a pan, a pair of scissors, a bowl and two bundles of straw for bedding. Following her directions, we took off to hide ourselves in a tea plant grove.

The tea plant groves were dense with boundless borders, leading to the hills above and connecting the fields below while encompassing many tracts of scattered bamboo groves. It was a safe place to hide.

We found a piece of dry land which we covered with straw and built up a small shed with branches. By the time we'd finished, it was daylight.

The sun shone brightly on the snow-covered mountain tops. Little white cotton-ball clouds were floating by the mountains. When the wind blew, a whistling sound could be heard from the pine groves. Then I heard the pleasant chirping of a bird, probably the red plumaged cuckoo bird.

Father had a heavy heart. Lying on the straw, he muttered to himself: "Spring's coming and the cuckoo bird's singing."

I touched my swollen feet which were itching terribly and burning with pain. The bird's chirpings made me feel sad, too. I looked at Daddy and said, "Daddy, Mama. I want Mama. . . ." Scarcely had I uttered "Mama", when I buried my head in the straw and burst into tears: "Mama! Mama! . . ." The more I cried, the more I lost control and the louder my crying became.

Father didn't know what to do. I cried for a good while, before he told me: "Enough crying! Now, stop it!"

Looking up at Father, I saw his face was terribly pale and his eyes red with weeping.

The cuckoo bird kept singing and singing. Father flung a piece of dirt at the bird and then turned round, facing the west. I knew Father was missing Mother and the Red Army. Glancing at his back, I wished I knew how to console him. Then, he turned back and said to me, "My son, it's not the right time to hear birds chirping. Now, get up. Let's try to get something to eat."

And so we began to live the same life we had at Yellow Grass Lowland. We put in the porcelain basin the bamboo shoots and wild vegetables we dug from the ground, the bark we peeled from trees and an assemblage of other herbs and grasses. We sprinkled them with the grain the old woman had given us in the same manner as Mother had sprinkled salt on vegetables. Since we were afraid of smoke being seen by the enemy, Father thought of a plan: when he made the fire, I fanned the smoke with my old jacket to disperse it so that it mixed in with the mist.

After ten or more days, my feet got better and Father's wound, which he bathed every day with spring water and baked in the sun, came out safely from its infection. On the evening of the twelfth day,

Father and I were awakened by the bright light of flames and saw the villages in the middle part of the hill on fire.

The enemy was setting fires everywhere. We thought about the old woman as we gazed at the flames. Where was she now?

At daybreak, I was awakened by Father, who stroked my head gently and asked: "My son, you want to avenge your mother?"

"Of course. If I do catch the Whites, I will. . . ."

"But how can you avenge your mother?"

"I'll go find the Red Army!" I answered. We had carried on this kind of conversation many times. But now I knew for sure he was asking me to do something.

"Daddy! What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"My son, go to the village to find out some news! If I go out with five or six inches of my long hair, I would be taken as a criminal. You. . . ."

"Daddy! When can I go?" I asked, jumping up with delight without waiting for him to finish.

"Don't be impatient. Suppose you were arrested, what would you do?" asked Father, with his hands on my shoulders.

"I would fight with them!"

"No," said Father solemnly, "if you did fight, you couldn't withstand even one blow!"

"Then. . . ."

"In case you're captured, just say you're a beggar looking for the old woman. Even if they question you closely, don't mention where I am."

"Daddy, I'm not a fool!"

"In case they force you to go with them, go ahead. But take every opportunity to run away. If you can't escape, Daddy will find a way to free you."

"I see," I said, very pleased.

"Go first to see the old woman. Ask her whether she has had any news from the Red Army. Come back if you're unable to find her. Be smart! Try in every way to keep away from the enemy! Understood?"

I nodded. Having given me some more instructions, he tied up my shoelaces and tightened my belt. He patted my shoulder as I ran off on my mission.

When I came to the village, I stopped outside in a dense woods to take a careful look. It was hard to see what was happening in the village or to make out where the fire had burned last night. Finally I decided I had to go in to take a look. I thought they could do nothing to a child like me.

Except for the old woman's house, which didn't seem to be touched by fire, I found all the other houses in the village reduced almost to ashes. Remnants of walls were still smoking, giving an acrid smell to the air. As nobody was there, I felt more confident as I moved forward. All of a sudden, from behind a tree a White bandit appeared, holding a gun and yelling to me: "What are you doing there, you little Red rascal?"

It was too late to escape. I answered him boldly: "My name is Xiao Mao. I've come to see Granny."

"What! Come to see Granny! Don't try to fool us," he said and laughed. He grabbed my arm and ordered: "Come with me!"

I decided to throw myself on the ground and act like a spoiled child. I cried and yelled: "Granny! Granny! Come quickly!"

I yelled at the top of my voice, hoping that on hearing me she might come to my rescue.

Instead of the old woman a number of White bandits appeared. They surrounded me and questioned me roughly. The man who arrested me said, "This little bastard must be a spy sent by the Reds. He's only pretending to be looking for his grandmother." So saying, he slapped me so hard that I fell to the ground. He came over and kicked me in the stomach. "Speak up! Who sent you here?"

I pretended I'd lost consciousness and lay still.

"Tell him to move on. There are no more Reds here, so who could have sent him to spy?" said another White bandit.

"Your grandmother has been sent to the Reformation Camp in the Dafeng Mountains. Disappear, Kid," another one said.

I thought I had convinced them, so I sat up rubbing my eyes



and thought about hurrying away while I could. But then I thought again: Suppose I go back like this with no information, Daddy and I would still be in the dark not knowing where to find the Red Army. Why not enter the house and try to get some news. So I purposely hung around and brought attention to myself. "I haven't eaten anything the whole day. I'm so hungry," I called out. "I want to see Granny. Where did you send her?" I ran to the house.

No sooner had I run up to the door than out came a White bandit wearing a pistol. When he saw me running around, he gave me a kick, cursing me: "Where does this little bastard come from?" Another bandit answered with a salute: "He's the old woman's grandson!"

"Scram!" he said, lashing out at me. Pretending to be afraid, I dodged behind a wall with my legs curled up and my head down. The bandit officer turned around and whistled.

"Assemble!"

All the bandits inside and outside the house came and stood on the drilling ground. The bandit officer asked: "Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

"Shape up then!"

The bandit officer walked in front of the regiment, his hands behind his back. He stopped in front of one man and gave him two sound slaps on the ears. "That'll pay for your sloppiness! We've found a large contingent of Reds in Qingsongling Mountains. We must make a quick march of 140 *li*. As soon as we get there, we'll charge them. Do you want the Regiment Commander to blame me for a failure? So you'd better be ready. . . ."

I had to go tell Father quickly. As they were not paying attention to me, I slipped out the backdoor. On one side of the walls surrounding the courtyard lay a pile of straw. I got up on it, then climbed the wall. I closed my eyes and jumped down into a ditch full of pebbles. Bruised but otherwise unhurt, I ran and hid in some tall grass.

After a while, I heard one of the bandits ask: "Where's that little rascal?" But after a while, there was no sound. They had left.

I crept out of the grass and ran into the house, trying to find something to eat. I caught sight of half a package of cigarettes, and some pieces of corn-flour crusts lying on one side of a bed. I took a bite of a crust then ran back to Father. When I told him all that had happened, he embraced me warmly.

My father had never before shown me so much affection.

Though the Whites were gone, they left behind them a great number of reactionary organizations, big and small. Father could not show his face in the daytime. We would have to sleep by day and start our journey at sunset. It was 140 *li* from there to Qingsongling Mountains by road and more than 200 *li* by path.

Father lay down, determined to carry out the plan to travel by night. At first he tossed and turned several times but after a little while fell into a sound sleep. I lay with my eyes wide open, thinking about soon seeing the Red Army and saving Mother. . . . The more I thought, the less sleepy I became. I crept out from the straw to hunt some kind of souvenirs to give the Red Army.

In my excitement, I darted all over the hills and valleys. Once I nearly caught a squirrel. Finally I saw a little rabbit. I felt I had touched its fur with my hands before it chided me and hopped away out of sight. I ran around quite a long time, but I found nothing until at last on my way back I picked up two things: a piece of red stone and a vine naturally shaped like a walking stick.

At the beginning of our night trek, I followed Daddy quite well but towards dawn I was completely exhausted. We hid ourselves in a cave during the day and resumed our journey at night. This time it was worse. Though we had had a good sleep in the daytime, we had eaten nothing and felt giddy on our feet. We then ran into bad luck with the weather. Rain came pouring down on us. It fell heavily on the mountains, fields, trees, roads — everywhere drenched with rain.

Every few steps we stopped to mop the rain from our faces. We were trembling with cold and hunger — our last food having been the

tiny bit of wild vegetables we'd eaten the day before. Our feet sank deep in mud.

We trudged on and on and with much difficulty we covered only 30 *li*. Then we came across a small river with a wild torrent spurred on by the rains. It was hard to hear each other talk standing next to it. Father waded in a bit and shouted to me: "It's not deep. We can wade through. Come on! Let me help you!"

I waded slowly in holding onto Father. I felt my ears ringing. In the middle of the river, the current caught Father and threw him off balance. We both tumbled into the water, but fortunately Father was alert enough to catch me by the leg and drag us both onto the bank.

"My son, let's keep going," Father said.

I stood up, staggered a few steps, then fell into a sitting position in the mud.

"It's only 70 *li* to Qingsongling Mountains," said Father, squatting next to me, "very few families live here. If we stop now, we will either be captured or starve to death. My son, we must move on. . . ."

I wanted to say: "Daddy, I'm ready to go." But no sound came from my mouth. Seeing my trembling lips, Father must have thought I was going to cry as he said: "Don't cry, be a brave boy!" So saying, he pulled me to my feet, unfortunately, my legs couldn't move. He gave me a push forward but I fell backwards, my legs stiff together as if they were tied by a string. When Father saw this, tears fell from his eyes. He picked me up and carried me on his back. After he'd walked about one *li*, I heard him breathing hard. "Daddy, my legs are all right again," I said.

Father helped me on in the downpour. At one point, we had to crawl inch by inch. Father kept saying: "Hold on! As soon as we get to Qingsongling Mountains, you can enlist as a junior armyman and join the fight against our enemy."

"Will I be given a gun?"

"Certainly! You'll be granted a small gun."

We arrived at the foot of another hill. With Father's support I managed to walk on flat ground but in climbing, I felt my feet weigh

heavier and heavier. We both had to have the help of our hands in climbing up. I moved only two steps at a time, then rolled back again because my hands — pricked by thistles — couldn't hold on. Father saw there was nothing to do but carry me on his back again. As we approached the summit, he murmured in a weak voice, "My son, get down. . . ." Before I could do so he rolled over in a faint. I fell from his back, rolled down into a sand ditch at the foot of the hill, and also passed out.

When I opened my eyes, it was no longer night. The rain had stopped, but there was a heavy fog. It was hard to make out things beyond a distance of 5 feet. I called: "Daddy! Where are you?"

I couldn't move on my burning and swollen legs. I shouted until my voice grew hoarse. Suddenly, I heard a faint voice calling: "Xiao Gu." Was there something wrong with my hearing or was it true that Father was calling?

It was Daddy. This man who had been so strong looked thin and bent, his long hair streaming down his forehead, his face as dark as if it had been painted with charcoal dust.

I embraced him and cried: "Daddy, you go on by yourself! Go find the Red Army quickly!"

"Get up, my son! Don't you want to go with Daddy to find the Red Army, to find Mother?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Then, take heart and let's go!"

"I can't move a step more."

"Oh! . . ."

"Daddy! Go by yourself. When you find the Red Army, come and fetch me!"

"This. . . ."

"You have no strength to carry me. If we're doomed to die on the mountain, let me die alone. . . ."

Father shook his head, "You're such a young lad, why use such a word as 'death'? We must live to make revolution!"

Father tried to help me move on. But finally he had to give up. He put me in a cave and said, "My son, Daddy can find the Red Army

for sure. Don't leave the cave until I come for you."

Daddy was gone! I leaned out of the cave and saw him move away step by step till gradually his shadow was lost in the fog. "Daddy!" I shouted in a faint voice before I fell back into the cave.

A day passed. I closed my eyes and felt my body was floating in the air.

I flew into Mama's arms. "How are you, my son?" she asked. "Mama, I miss you so much," I said.

"Oh, please don't! Be a good son and work for revolution when you grow up."

"But, Mama, I can't help it!"

All of a sudden, devils came and snatched her away. They stripped her and beat her with a stick. Blood ran from her mouth. I ran over and shot all the devils with my little gun. Then I flew up to our chairman to whom I asked: "Chairman! Why are the devils trying to kill Mama?"

"Because your Mama wants to make revolution."

"How should I conduct myself in the future, Chairman?"

"My son! The Red Army is your mother who will bring you up and educate you to be a good son of the Red Army. The Red Army must wipe out the Whites so that China can be like the liberated areas where people enjoy a happy life."

"Chairman, I'll follow your teachings. Take me with you!"

He put his hands on my shoulders and said, "Come and see your father, who is now a squad leader."

"Chairman, can I see the future world?"

"Certainly," he said, "but a happy world will not come to us without struggle. Struggle! Understand?"

"Yes," I said, "it means the destruction of local tyrants and evil gentry. Down with landlords and imperialism, down with the reactionaries!"

We chatted while flying round in space. Suddenly someone called me in a light voice, "My son, wake up!"

I opened my eyes to see bending over me a Red Armyman, with

a gun on his shoulder, his face covered with a bushy beard, beaming with a kind smile. I had already been put in a room.

"Chairman!" I said. This must be our chairman who flew up here with me. But why wasn't I flying any more?

Chairman Wang clapped his hands and laughed: "Well, he'll soon be well again!"

Father came over to me, followed by a number of other men. "Well, you've come to yourself. My son, we've found the Red Army," he said in a trembling voice.

I realized where I was and what had happened. I looked up at Chairman Wang who laid his hand on my shoulder and said: "This is a fine son of our Red Army!"

The other Red Armymen in the room laughed and started a song:

The cassia blossoms are blooming everywhere in August  
The red flags and banners are waving high. . . .

I joined Father in singing with them. Then I whispered in the ear of Chairman Wang: "Chairman, I must now really be a fine son of the Red Army!"

From that time on, I became a junior Red Armyman and, later, a true Red Armyman.

# The Photograph

## —In Praise of Teachers

### *Liu Houming*

27th July, 1955

My assignment completed, I returned to the editorial office for further orders. "Go and photograph the latest arrival at the zoo, a small chimpanzee," said Section Leader Huang. The job, he assured me, was quite urgent as the picture was needed for the next edition of the newspaper.

Leaving in a hurry, I was on the bus before I discovered that there was only one negative left in my camera. I consoled myself, never mind, if I focus carefully, one shot will do.

How was I to know that the unexpected would happen, and that for the first time in two years I would fail in my assignment?

It is summer vacation and today the youngsters had practically taken over the zoo. They were like a huge flock of magpies, creating noise and confusion as they ran here and there. The uproar seemed to make the dry, hot day drier and hotter.

Almost as soon as I put my foot inside the gate, a boy attached himself to me. He was about eleven years old, very dusty and wearing a red vest, blue shorts, the end of his belt flapping loose. His closely cropped hair standing up stiffly around his head reminded me of a huge dandelion. Like a moth round a lamp, he circled round me, never taking his eyes off my flashlamp.

I knew I must be on my guard, for there were several youngsters like him living in our block of flats and they were always up to some

tricks. They would either kick their football through your windows and startle you, or like an army rushing in pursuit of the enemy, would chase neighbour Huang's hens all around the compound. During their holidays, they would make such an uproar on the upper floor that the ceiling of my room seemed to shake, and I felt aggravated and uneasy.

The boy in the red vest finally got close enough to touch the shining cover of my flashlamp.

"What are you up to?" I asked rather gruffly.

"Uncle, please open it and let me see the light?" he asked not the least bit shy.

"No, certainly not," I replied coldly.

Not appearing to notice my intended rebuff, he continued to run beside me. There was a broad grin on his face as he again addressed me, "Uncle, what kind of a lamp is it? Is it very bright?"

I walked along, ignoring him completely.

I had no children of my own and although I was fond of youngsters they tired me. When I had the time to spare, I enjoyed amusing them, but I knew that they must be treated with reserve, otherwise they could cause a lot of trouble.

Locating the little chimpanzee's cage, I succeeded, after some effort, in squeezing myself into the front row of the spectators. Ha, how lucky I was! The little monkey was eating. It looked almost like a child as it sat on a stool, drinking milk from an enamel cup, which it held with both hands. Some milk had dribbled from the corner of its mouth, and hung like a string of pearls on to its hairy little chest. What a wonderful photograph it would make!

However, I hadn't taken it yet. It was too soon to be cocksure about it.

I manoeuvred to get a good angle, focused the camera, waited until the image was sharp, lifted the flashlamp, and holding my breath, pressed the lever. What followed happened more quickly than I can recount it. The very instant the shutter clicked and the lamp flashed, the image of the little chimpanzee was blotted out by a human face!

"Who's that?" I shouted out angrily. As I raised my head, I saw



the boy in the red vest standing on the cement steps outside the cage. He was jumping with joy and greatly excited, as he clapped his hands and yelled: "It was dazzling! My eyes are all blurred! What fun!"

Trembling with anger, I tried to seize him, but he darted away like a flying-fish and disappeared in the crowd in the twinkling of an eye. The onlookers laughed heartily at my expense. . . .

Suppressing my anger and nursing my injured feelings, I hurried back to the office.

"Why are you dashing around and sweating like that?" asked Huang as he caught sight of me. "The house isn't on fire!"

"I didn't get a good picture," I replied indignantly, "I've come back for another roll of films."

"Oh!" exclaimed Huang in surprise, "that means you'll be too late for this edition. The news office has no helicopter, and you can't fly. . . . What's wrong with the picture? Develop the negative and let's have a look!"

Huang's words made me think that perhaps by a chance in a thousand, I had managed to photograph the little chimpanzee. However, I was doomed to disappointment! The proof showed only that shock-headed boy in the red vest, his mouth and eyes open wide in excitement as though he were caught in the midst of declaring: "How dazzling! What fun!"

Huang, examining the picture under the light, asked, "What's this? It doesn't look like a small chimpanzee to me."

I wanted to pour out all my disappointment and annoyance, but only managed to say a few words before I choked. I could have wept with vexation. This was my first failure in two years.

"Well, forget it," suggested Huang trying to comfort me. "I've a picture of a seaside swimming pool. I'll use that as a substitute."

I replied, "I'll go again early tomorrow morning and take a picture of the chimpanzee."

"Leave it till later," said Huang. "Your assignment for tomorrow is to take pictures of Yu Jinlian. The Culture and Education Section wants them by the day after tomorrow."

The name of Yu Jinlian was familiar to me. I knew her as a people's deputy to the people's congress of the city and also as an excellent primary school teacher, and was determined to take a good picture of her.

I couldn't eat much at supper-time but now, when I had got over my feeling of frustration, I feel very hungry. . . .

*28th July, 1955*

Yu Jinlian's home was in a street quite near the news office, and when I walked into the clean, quiet courtyard this morning, Teacher Yu who was in her late fifties was on her porch writing. She wrote skilfully with a brush. A smile hovered on her face, which was both serene and gentle, and a light breeze was gently ruffling her grey hair.

I skirted quietly around a few pots of oleanders, pomegranates and dahlias arranged square-wise in the centre of the courtyard, and took a picture of her in profile. When she turned her head and saw me, I had already taken a second shot.

"You're really quick to seize an opportunity," she said greeting me like an old friend. Then inviting me to sit down she handed me a cup of tea and a palm-leaf fan, which she had ready to hand. I'd often heard people say that teachers are considerate. Now I know it's quite true.

"What are you working at so industriously?" I asked.

"Correcting and commenting on some compositions — it's the children's summer vacation work."

I opened one of the exercise books and scanned through an essay entitled "A Happy Day!" Lines of characters, written in pen and ink, were neatly corrected by the teacher. Her writing was fine and painstaking — every character beautifully written.

Noting the pile of books on the corner of the table, I could not help feeling some sympathy for the old teacher, for I saw that the correction of such a number of "A Happy Day" would cause her many "hardworking days". Our editor complained of a headache after only one day's work consisting of reading a dozen articles!

Thinking that I was interested in the essays, Teacher Yu commented enthusiastically, "Look, how well this sentence is written! 'Butterflies flit among the flowers as though playing hide and seek!' here is another one, 'The days passed like a song!' When I was young we could not write so vividly. We were only taught to write things like 'time flies like an arrow, days and months fly like a shuttle', or 'living in the world one must attach first importance to clothing, food, house and conveyance'. They are worn-out phrases typical of the decay and decline of the times in which we lived. You will probably say that these little essays are simple and childish but see how fresh and lively they are. The simple, childish sentiments expressed by the children today are what I could never have experienced during the last fifty years in the old society..."

Teacher Yu opened the books praising them one after another. As she did so, her eyes expressed her heartfelt pleasure and smiles of satisfaction rippled across her face.

I began to feel that the characters written by her pupils were not only the result of her work, but also the fountain of her joy and strength.

"How many years have you been a teacher in primary school?" I asked.

"Thirty-six years," she replied, "but the more I teach, the more I realize how little I know. For instance, I know nothing at all about this flashlamp of yours. Please show it to me."

I thought this strange. Only the previous day my flashlamp had attracted the attention of that boy in the red vest, and today this teacher wanted to see it. My profession must arouse curiosity.

Of course I prided myself. To be a news photographer is far more suitable to a young man than being a primary school teacher; to defy difficulties, overcome obstacles, be here today and there tomorrow; how vigorous and exciting our life is. Except of course when we have bad luck, as I did yesterday with that boy in the red vest!

With enthusiasm, I explained my useful companion, the flashlamp, to Teacher Yu.

"Your description is too brief," she remarked. "Can you take it apart and give me an object lesson as I do in my classes?"

As I complied with her request I inquired, "Are you an amateur photographer, too?"

The teacher smiled and shook her head in a manner that clearly indicated: "Go on! I'm interested anyway."

I developed the pictures of Teacher Yu in the evening and sent them to the Culture and Education Section. They were very satisfied.

*4th August, 1955*

My work for the anniversary of Army Day finished, so early this morning, I went to the zoo to take the picture of the little chimpanzee.

There had been a downpour of rain during the night, and the trees and plants looked fresh and beautiful. Many different kinds of birds flew from tree to tree, their songs blending into one harmonious chorus.

Walking slowly along the deserted, shaded path, I saw a pair of black shoes at the foot of a tall poplar. Thinking they had been lost by some child I was about to pick them up, when a voice shouted from above:

"Don't take them, they're mine!"

Rain-drops left on the tree after last night's shower fell on me, and looking up I espied something red moving among the dense green leaves. A moment later, a pair of shoeless feet began to descend, and like a monkey a boy slid down the smooth, sturdy tree trunk, descending so quickly that I had fears for his safety.

I quickly recovered when I recognized the youngster.

"Oh, so it's you!" I exclaimed impulsively, thinking to myself, "It's always easy to meet the people you would like to avoid."

"Uncle, you're here again!" he declared sounding as pleased as if he were meeting a long absent friend.

Wiping the rain-drops from my face, I inquired coldly, "What were you doing up the tree?"

"Uncle," he said, pointing to the top of the tree, "there's a nest

up there with some small birds in it. I think they are little cushats. I'll find out from my teacher if I'm right. My teacher knows everything. They're like balls of fluff, so funny! The day before yesterday I saw the two big birds, carrying food to the nest. They made one trip after another. I thought there must be small birds inside, and when it rained in the night, I was worried and afraid they would get wet. So I just went up to have a look — the young birds are still there right enough, as dry as snuff. . . ."

Bent on reproving him, I asked, "Don't you know that tree-climbing is forbidden in parks? It's very dangerous too."

He appeared not to hear what I said. Fixing his gaze on my flashlamp, with an air of triumph he declared: "I know all about it without your telling me. It's called a magnesium-light lamp. You use a kind of powder called . . . called magnesium powder — yes, magnesium powder! When it comes into contact with electricity, it just. . . ."

"That's enough, that's enough!" I interrupted, my annoyance increasing because of his happy mood. "D'you remember what happened when we first met? And what you did then?"

His only reply was a ripple of laughter.

"Here, look," I said, taking his photograph from my pocket, "I took your picture instead of that of the chimpanzee."

"Oh! It's good! Please give it to me!" he begged, taking the picture and smiling so that his eyes narrowed like a pair of crescent moons. The picture had found its way into the pocket in his pants before he had finished talking.

It was obvious that he didn't feel at all sorry. This irritated me and was like oil on the fire of my anger. Looking at him severely I fired questions at him:

"How old are you?"

"Eleven and half."

"Do you belong to the Young Pioneers?"

"Yes."

The boy's face turned pale, and he blinked as though wondering: Have I offended him? Why is he so angry?

Hm! Now I'll make you see why! I thought.

"What you did that day was not what a Young Pioneer should do! I wasn't taking the little chimpanzee's picture for fun." I continued, my tone was hard and severe. "That's my work. I'm a news photographer."

I told him how his practical joke had upset our editorial plan, and emphasized that thousands and thousands of readers had not been able to see the picture because of his behaviour.

His face was expressionless as he listened.

"You are not careful enough of the honour of the red scarf!" Then thinking to teach the little nuisance a lesson, I concluded, "I wonder what you'll do if I tell your teacher and schoolmates about it!"

He stood mute, and as motionless as though turned into a block of wood. Suddenly, picking up his shoes, quick as a flash of lightning he turned round and ran. As he went, I could hear his naked feet making a flip-flap sound on the asphalted road. He disappeared in the distance.

I thought I had done the right thing — and had made him feel ashamed. Teacher Yu, I reflected, probably taught her students the same way. But, the flip-flap of his bare feet kept ringing in my ears, and an unaccountable feeling of unhappiness seemed to descend on me.

*5th August, 1955*

After the newspaper had published Teacher Yu's picture and the account of her fine record as a teacher, the Editorial Department received many letters from readers. Of these, one came from a coastal frontier guard, one from the members of the Great Northern Wilderness Reclamation Team, but the majority were from teachers in primary schools and students in teachers' colleges in many different parts of the country. They all praised Teacher Yu's work and expressed their desire to learn from her.

In the evening, as I was passing Yu's home, I decided to call in, and tell her about the letters. Yu's youngest daughter, a student at

the teachers' college, was sitting outside reading by the courtyard light. Seeing me, she looked in the direction of the house and whispered, "Mother isn't feeling very happy tonight. A boy came yesterday afternoon, pushed his red scarf into Mama's lap and, choking with sobs, said: 'Teacher Yu, I'm not worthy to be a Young Pioneer. I'm not worthy!' When Mama asked him what was the matter, he burst into tears, turned around and ran away.

"Mama has just returned from a visit to the boy's home. He wasn't in, and the other members of his family couldn't explain his action. I expect the boy had been up to some mischief, and his self-respect was hurt."

Oh, so no great tragedy had happened after all. . . . I felt much easier.

When I entered Yu's house I hastened to be the first to speak, and to choose a pleasant topic, "Teacher Yu, since your picture and an article about you appeared in the newspaper, readers have sent in many favourable comments. Everyday we continue to receive letters, some from teachers, some from fathers and mothers, all of them saying that they want to learn your fine method of educating children."

Sad to relate, my talk produced a result quite contrary to my expectations. Forcing a smile and heaving a sigh, the old teacher neatly folded a red scarf into a square, her unhappiness obvious as she said, "I'm far from being what the people expect."

In an effort to cheer her up, I urged, "Please don't say that, a naughty child has done a little mischief, that's all! If this child has really done something very wrong it is all right for you to reprove him."

"No, a teacher has no right to say that," replied Yu as she smoothed the red scarf on her knee, as though caressing the hair of a child. "This particular boy is brave, has great self-respect and a great curiosity. At the same time, he can be naughty and often makes mischief. In dealing with a child like this, great care must be taken or you will be throwing out the precious wheat seedlings when you should be uprooting the weeds. An oversight can mean that a valuable young plant is mistaken for a weed."

"Yes, you're right," I answered in a voice that faltered a little, her words having stirred up an uneasy feeling inside me.

After saying good-bye to the old teacher, I walked slowly along the street. A gentle soothing breeze was blowing but I felt hot and uneasy, as confused thoughts surged through my mind.

I meditated, all mothers love their children and teachers are the mothers of all children. In comparison with Yu, I hadn't shown up too well. The only thing I'd given that boy in the red vest was an exhibition of my own anger. I wondered, had I hurt his feelings; had I unintentionally rooted out a valuable young plant, while trying to get rid of the weeds?

Perhaps I ought to go to the zoo and look for him and then have a quiet chat with him; youngsters can do wrong to an adult but an adult must not do wrong to a child, without trying to put things right.

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*6th August, 1955*

I strolled in the zoo the greater part of the morning today, but without results. There were several children in red vests, but unfortunately he was not one of them. I stood under that familiar big poplar for practically half an hour, and although I listened to the cry of the young birds, my ears seemed full of the sound of flip-flapping of bare feet.

The more I thought about it the more I was convinced that the boy in the red vest only jumped before my camera to see how the flashlamp worked, and that he had no intention of upsetting my plans for picture-taking. He was prompted by the same curiosity that he climbed the big poplar tree. He did it only to see if the small cushats were wet, and without any thought of hurting them.

Ah! Perhaps I had done him an injustice.

*17th December, 1955*

A heavy snow fell all last night. This morning, the entire staff of the photographic department was out taking pictures of people carry-



ing on their work in spite of the wind, cold and snow. They included workers such as street sweepers, traffic police, pedlars and artists painting snow scenes. A number of pictures were scheduled to appear in the next issue of the Sunday Pictorial, under the caption "In bleak wind and snow, hearts are warm!"

I went to a crossroad to take a picture of a young traffic policeman. Against a silver background and protected by a short, black fur overcoat, he stood, quietly directing the coming and going of vehicles. Snow caught up by the wind whipped his face, he stood determined and dauntless.

Having found a good angle for the shot, I stood on the sidewalk ready to take the picture. However, there was a hitch. It was rush-hour, and school-children and pedestrians passed before the camera with the rapidity of shuttles in a weaving shed. I posed the camera several times, but was compelled to abandon all hope of getting a good picture because of the number of people flitting past.

It could not be helped! No one wanted to stop in the street when the temperature was 20 degrees below zero. Besides, in this whirling snow, people were hurrying on and did not notice that a news photographer was trying to take a picture of the policeman.

I began to shiver with cold, and my hands and feet were becoming numb. To add to my problems, if things continued like this, I risked causing damage to the camera by long exposure to the cold.

I posed my camera once more, and then noticed many people rushing to catch a bus which was approaching the nearby bus-stop. Heaving a sigh, I was about to lower the camera again when I heard someone shout in a clear, sharp voice:

"Stop, everybody! Photographs are being taken!"

The confused shuffling of foot-steps stopped suddenly.

A quick glance around I saw a boy, wearing a blue woollen jacket, a red scarf and a fur cap, with the flaps about his ears. He stood, arms outstretched, obstructing a small group of pedestrians, all taller than himself by a head. He was shouting to those coming up behind:

"Comrades, please observe that all traffic is stopped for just half a minute!"

His politeness and good humour made everybody laugh.

The voice and appearance of this boy seemed familiar to me and he looked as though he recognized me too.

There was no time to waste on such thoughts, swiftly I took the picture.

Like a sudden gust of wind, the people swept on and into the bus. The boy waited until everybody else was aboard, then grasping the handle, with one agile jump he was inside the bus, and the door closed.

I searched my memory trying to remember where I had seen that face before and wondering who he was. Then suddenly a small head with black hair bristling, like a fluffy dandelion, appeared from the window of the bus, and a hand waved a fur cap with ear flaps dangling.

Above the noise of the traffic, I heard the words:

"See you again, Uncle News Photographer!"

"You!" I exclaimed, suddenly realizing that he was the boy in the red vest, whom I had twice met in the zoo last summer. However, my exclamation was lost as the traffic rolled on. I watched the bus until it became a tiny red spot, disappearing in the snow-covered distance.

A gleam of winter sunlight shot through a break in the clouds, flooding the whole world with a golden light. I walked back to the news office full of happiness, the camera on my shoulder seemed a trifle heavier; inside it was the heart of a Young Pioneer!

*21th January, 1956*

I am due to leave Beijing tomorrow for Guazhou where I am to become a resident correspondent. This afternoon after purchasing my train ticket, I returned to the news office where I learned that a meeting was being convened by the Culture and Education Section in one of our meeting rooms. As Teacher Yu had been invited, I thought I would take this opportunity to say good-bye to her.

Twenty minutes before the meeting was due to commence, Yu

was already in the room and engaged in earnest conversation with a young teacher. The old teacher, wearing a dark blue padded coat, was in high spirits and looking very well.

"Teacher Yu," I said as I went up to shake hands with her, "I'm leaving for Guangzhou tomorrow to take up the post as a resident correspondent."

"Oh!" she said as she pulled me down to sit beside her, "you mustn't forget to let us have an account of the experiences of the teachers in Guangzhou."

"Certainly, with pleasure," I agreed, adding, "I take a great interest in the education of children."

This is true. Ever since that morning of wind and snow, I had longed, like one longing for the sight of an old friend, to see that boy in the red vest again. Strange as it may seem, I had begun to take a real liking to children, particularly naughty boys. I could see in them the spirit of the boy in the red vest. I found myself really believing that they would grow up well, despite their naughtiness when young. I loved to tell them stories and settle their quarrels and disputes. Gradually, they began to like me, too, and would listen to what I had to say. Once Huang remarked jokingly: "You've become the king of the kids in our apartment!" His wife added: "When international Working Women's Day comes, we'll invite you to our party! . . ."

Impressed by my sincerity, Teacher Yu looked very pleased, and asked me how I had become so interested in the education of children. I answered by telling her about my two summer encounters with that boy in the zoo.

Yu listened attentively. However, when I mentioned that windy, snowy morning, how the same boy had helped me to take a picture of a traffic policeman, she showed surprise at first, as though she had just heard some important news. Later her genuine pleasure was obvious and I saw that her eyes were moist with unshed tears.

Teacher Yu held my hands tightly as if she wanted to say something. Just at this moment, several other teachers, who had come to participate in the meeting, entered the room and greeted her. Some-

one also came to ask her about her health. "Young fellow," she said cheerfully, "let us have a competition. I am just returning from old age to girlhood!" Everyone laughed.

I stood up as the meeting was about to begin. Yu stood up too.

Helping me to button the collar of my padded jacket, she said, "What you told me today is very good -- very good indeed! Happy journey!"

The joyful feeling inspired in me by Yu remained, as I mused, Teacher Yu, you and the children are bound together by ties of love! You are anxious and unhappy when a child has a little fault, but you're filled with happiness when they make the slightest progress. How wonderful it would be if that "boy in the red vest" were your student!

*6th April, 1959*

(A couple of weeks after my return from Guangzhou.)

This morning, I was assigned to the Tiananmen Square to cover the Beijing Juvenile Aeronautical Model Competition and take pictures of the winners.

Flooded with brilliant sunshine, the Square, overflowing with the innocent laughter and singing of youngsters, presented a delightful picture of spring.

The competition opened, batches of planes of all sorts and sizes, assisted by the warm winds of spring, shot up and circled in the air. Numerous secondary school students, red scarfs flying like banners, looked on, cheering and dancing for joy. The Square quickly became one vast sea of excitement, the noise rising and falling in waves.

The loudspeaker continually announced the names of the winners, and I ran here and there taking pictures, and sharing the children's joy.

Another batch of small planes took off. One of them made an outstanding performance, flying more steadily and reaching a height far above that of the others. Under the sunlight the wings of this plane, white and transparent, looked like the wings of a dragon-fly. The other planes had returned to the ground before this one began

descending in a long curve. Nose up, and seeming to quiver with pride, it skimmed now higher, now lower.

Absolute quiet reigned over the Square. On the rostrum, a time-keeper, eyes fixed on the stopwatch in his hands, suddenly announced through the loudspeaker in a jubilant voice:

“Comrades, the plane above our heads has now equalled the all-China record for the third grade rubber elastic model plane!”

Thunderous cheers exploded like firecrackers in the Square. Spectators broke through the cordon, and like water bursting from a dam, they rushed to the point where the plane finally landed.

The loudspeaker announced, “Comrades, the maker of this plane is Tian Chunxian — Tian Chunxian, second-year student at the 43rd Secondary School! . . .”

The rostrum was now surrounded by a thick wall of spectators, and I could not find an opening no matter how hard I tried. At last, I had no alternative but to appeal to them, one by one, to make room for me to pass through. In this way I moved forward step by step like the foot-soldier on a chessboard.

When I saw the winning student standing in the centre, I was so surprised that I could hardly believe my own eyes. He was my old acquaintance, the boy in the red vest! Although he was now taller than me and his hair was brushed and neatly parted, he was still alert and roguish looking and when he smiled his eyes crinkled into crescent moons!

My own eyes misted over. This national record maker for the third grade rubber elastic plane was the same dirty little chap who had wanted to know how my flashlamp worked. It hardly seemed possible that he was the same naughty boy who had climbed the big poplar to see if the tiny cushats were wet?

Onlookers scattered as the next item was announced, and as I walked over to him I shouted, “Tian Chunxian! You!”

“Uncle News Photographer!” Tian exclaimed shaking hands in the manner of an adult, and as I held his hand I thought: Child, how did you grow up to be such a fine youngster!

"Now, let me take a special picture of you!" I suggested lightly.

Tian's face flushed red, as he said bashfully, "I still have that other picture!"

He took a little red leather backed note-book from his coat pocket and from it he pulled out a picture — the one I had taken four years ago at the zoo. There he was, wearing the red vest, his hair standing up like a dandelion and his eyes wide open in excitement. I thought I could once again hear his childish voice announcing: "It's dazzling! My eyes are all blurred! . . ."

On the back of the picture I noticed several lines of small, beautifully written characters. They read:

"You told me the origin of this picture, because you care for the honour of the red scarf. From now on, always think of others first, direct your courage into learning."

Your teacher,  
Yu Jinlian

Summer vacation, 1955

Now I was able to sing the last notes of a most beautiful song which had lingered in my mind for nearly four years.

## A Lake in the Grasslands

*Guo Dasen*

Li Mingming's aunt, a grassland primary school teacher, had invited Mingming to spend his summer vacation with her.

When the time arrived, Mingming got on an orange bus which rattled across the grassland a whole day before arriving at its destination just as the sun was setting.

Mingming sat down on a rock beside the bus station to wait for his aunt. Looking at the northwestern sky, he watched the sun set like a big fire ball. Soon it sank beneath the horizon, shedding its last glory on folds of pink clouds in the sky. In the distance, herdsmen with their cattle on their way home for the night dotted the landscape. Caught up in the unfamiliar and striking grassland scene, Mingming almost forgot about his aunt, who still had not shown up.

It was getting dark. The lamps in the village ahead glimmered like stars. Suddenly, Mingming heard the sound of horse hoofs clattering down a winding mountain path towards the bus station. "Is that my aunt coming? No, she can't ride," he thought. Indeed, it was not his aunt who arrived on horseback in front of him but a boy of thirteen or fourteen.

"Comrade, are you from Motor City? Is your name Li Mingming?"

It was a pleasant surprise for Mingming after such a long wait in the darkness to hear somebody call his name.

"I've been sent by Teacher Li. She's gone to the commune to attend a meeting," said the young man. "I'm sorry I'm so late."

Mingming felt uneasy, on learning his aunt was away.

"Since my aunt isn't home, where shall I go?"

"You can stay with me. My name is Lin Xiaoying, a student in her class."

"How kind of you. Are you the monitor?"

"No, I'm a pioneer," Lin Xiaoying answered.

Mingming climbed up on the back of the horse and seated himself in front of Lin Xiaoying, holding the mane tight. As the two youths trotted across the grassland, Mingming felt steadier on the back of the well-bred horse with Lin Xiaoying at the reins than he had all day on the jolting bus.

In the morning, Mingming awoke from a dream. The absence of his aunt disturbed him. Lin Xiaoying sensed this and was concerned about making his unexpected guest feel at home.

"Would you like to see the Starry Lake?" asked Lin Xiaoying.

It happened that Mingming had a special fondness for lakes since his home in Motor City was on one. He used to go to school along its bank.

"Is there a lake in the grassland?" Mingming asked with enthusiasm.

"Yes, let's go to Starry Lake!"

"Is it far away?"

"Not far," said Lin Xiaoying, who was happy to see Mingming was interested in his suggestion.

Early in the morning, the green grassland was tinged with a light blue morning glow along the eastern horizon as the sun rose. Almost in an instant the grassland scenery came into view with the rising sun in purple, orange, yellow, and green. Impressed by the changing aspect of the grassland in the early morning light, Mingming forgot his worries.

They came across a wide pasture.

"Beyond that patch of reeds, we'll come to Starry Lake," said Lin Xiaoying in high spirits.

Multi-coloured flowers — blue orchids, pink ivy glorybinds, yellow chrysanthemums and red China pinks — nodded at the breeze as the grassland was in its full summer bloom. Mingming had seen many



flowers in the city, but he had never dreamed to see so many kinds as there were in the grassland. He stopped to pick a big bouquet. Then Mingming watched a butterfly, about the size of a chrysanthemum blossom, fly past and land on a pink flower a little way off. Lin Xiaoying guessed what was in Mingming's mind. He took off his shirt, crouched over and caught the butterfly in one swoop. He gave it to Mingming who put it carefully between the leaves of his notebook. He thought:

"What good luck! I can give it to my biology teacher to make a specimen for the whole class."

Just as the two passed through the reed pond, a lark flew up in fright from the grass. Lin Xiaoying noticed that the lark did not fly far but circled around above them. They shouted at the bird, waving their hands. It flew towards the reed pond, then returned again.

"It's a mother lark. There must be eggs in the grass," said Lin Xiaoying.

He led Mingming through the grass in a search for the eggs. Soon, they did find a nest with yellow-green lark eggs. The bird, seeing its nest being molested, swooped down from the sky and circled above chirping loudly. At the cursing of the mother bird, Lin Xiaoying ordered the eggs be put back into the nest.

"Do you like larks?" he asked Mingming.

"Can you catch it?"

"You wait here. I'll be back in a moment," said Lin Xiaoying, nodding.

He ran towards a herd of horses some distance away. Soon he disappeared at one end of the pasture. Mingming sat there, listening to the chirping of birds. Then he stood up and walked slowly towards the bird's nest. Peeping through the grass, he saw the lark sitting on the eggs in her nest. Trying to imitate Xiaoying's catching the butterfly, he took off his coat and stole forward. But he made too much noise and the bird suddenly flew away. Mingming looked at the nest with its few eggs.

"How stupid I am to try to catch a bird that way," he thought. "Even if the bird were caught, the eggs would be crushed." He hoped

that Xiaoying hadn't seen him and was glad to see that Xiaoying was still far away. The frightened lark did not come back. He worried whether the lark would come back at all. Xiaoying finally returned in a sweat with a strand of hair from a horse tail. Mingming watched him make several loops with the horse hair, then fasten each loop around a mud ball. He arranged the loops around the entrance of the nest.

"All right! Let's hide ourselves," said Xiaoying.

They hid in the grass. Soon, the lark returned. After much chirping and hovering in the air over the nest, it dived into the grass. They waited, Mingming became impatient. He made a stir then admonished himself: "Be patient!" Finally, Xiaoying touched Mingming and said: "Let's go for the bird."

Just as Xiaoying had expected, the lark had been caught by the loop. Xiaoying told Mingming:

"It will make the lark happy if you put its nest and eggs in the cage, too. After a few days, the eggs will hatch. Otherwise, the lark will probably die from despair." Mingming listened and regretted his own awkwardness of a while ago. With diversions like catching birds in the grasslands, Mingming no longer worried about why his aunt wasn't at home. He took up the bird's nest made of straw and feathers and looked at Xiaoying. "What a capable guy!" he thought.

Carrying the bird, Mingming walked behind Xiaoying until Starry Lake came in view, wrapped in a white mist under the blazing sun which was now high in the sky.

"Let's go," yelled Xiaoying, and the two took off for the lake.

Xiaoying's high spirits infected Mingming. Instead of walking, they seemed to be flying above the grass.

They sat under some willow trees and rested. Xiaoying began to weave a bird cage out of willow branches. Mingming was impressed as he watched Xiaoying finish the cage promptly and neatly. It had windows and a door with two stars above them. They put the nest and the eggs in the middle of the cage, and then let the lark in. As Mingming held up the cage. He was so happy he almost shouted to Xiaoying: "How clever you are!"

After marching along the narrow winding trails, they came onto another cluster of reeds and a path running straight to the lake. The wind blew through the reeds and ruffled their hair.

The reeds encircled the Starry Lake like a solid wall. Inside, the lake was divided by reeds into a number of smaller lakes with natural currents joining them, creating a picture more beautiful than those in classical Chinese paintings. There were a number of small islands on the lake where wild ducks and other water birds lived. As the two youngsters approached a startled groups of wild ducks took off and landed again, sending up sprays of water that glistened in the sunlight.

Xiaoying and Mingming came to a sandy beach on the east bank of the lake that provided a swimming pool for children in summer. Many other boys were already swimming there.

Mingming, with bird cage in hand, became lost in watching the others playing in the water. Xiaoying took off his clothes and dived in. He swam like a fish. Now he treaded waters, then did the breast-stroke, then the backstroke.

The boys returned to the bank after they were exhausted and crowded around the young guest from Motor City with his lark.

"Come down and enjoy the cool water! Are you timid? Come on, we'll help you," they said.

Encouraged by the other boys, Mingming waded into the water. At first he couldn't stand well and felt nervous. But, with Xiaoying and the others coaching him he relaxed. He tried to imitate the other boys, using his arms to help keep his body afloat while kicking his legs. Xiaoying tied up the legs of his pants and plopped them into the water to fill them with air. The pants turned into pair of water wings which he gave Mingming. With the help of the water wings, Mingming floated into deeper water where he practised his strokes. Playing with Xiaoying and the other boys, he felt the same as he did with his best friends in the city. He felt at home.

Whenever tired of swimming, the boys would return to the bank where they rolled about, jumped and shouted in play.

Suddenly, dark clouds began to gather in the sky. A stronger

wind chilled the boys who heard the sound of distant thunder. The lake turned dark green.

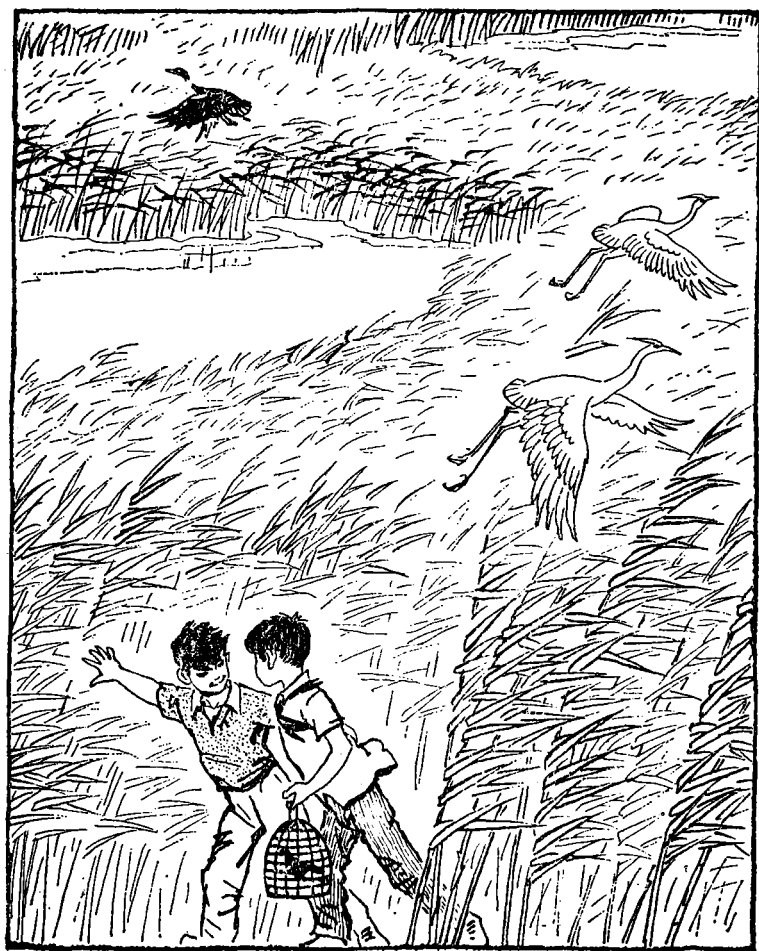
It was the first time that Mingming had ever experienced a storm in the open air. He felt frightened, especially since the other boys seemed afraid, too. Xiaoying was more confident.

"Don't worry. It's just a passing thunderstorm. It will clear up after a while." Then Xiaoying continued:

"When it is raining, let's soak ourselves in the lake. The water is very warm when it rains."

The boys sheltered themselves in the water while thunder roared and a heavy rain fell on the lake kicking up bubbles on its surface.

Then the wind died down, the rain stopped and the clouds fled. The sun appeared again in the clear sky. The grass looked more green and the lake water more clear. Suddenly, a rainbow appeared in the eastern sky above the grassland. The scene on grassland was even more fascinating.





# Pictures of Spring

*Wang Luyao*

The early morning broke over the school. But there were already many people surrounding the posted newspaper board. I thought there must be some important news, or an important editorial being published.

I'm the type of person who is interested in everything. Wherever there is a bustle of activity, no matter where, I'm always ahead of the crowd in running over there. But this time, I was a bit behind. I elbowed my way through until I reached the newspaper board. Someone pounded me on the back and grumbled: "What the hell are you shoving for?" I paid no attention to him. The main thing was to see the news.

But after squeezing my way forward to look, I saw that there was nothing special in the newspaper. I looked around and saw that everyone's attention was riveted to the fourth page of the supplement. I went over to look.

This issue featured new drawings and paintings under the title, at the top of the page, "New Sprouts". In the top right-hand corner was a picture of a group of youngsters surrounding an old worker. In his left hand, he was holding a "picket" armband, and his right hand was clenched into a fist. The look on his face suggested gravity and a state of agitation. Some of the children around him were attentive to the old worker's story, some indignant. Others clenched their hands into fists, while still others clutched at the red scarves at their chests.

Ah! The scene was so familiar! Wasn't this the way our class looked when we went to visit Changxindian Railroad Rolling Stock

Factory? The old worker in the picture was none other than Grandpa Li who told us about the working class struggle in his factory.

Right! No doubt about it! Looking closer, I saw the clearly written line at the bottom: "No. 3 Middle School by Lei Xiaoyi." Ah, no wonder it had attracted such a crowd!

"Tang Chong, how about you? As one of the two artists of our class, you should come with one too! That would be great!" Li Dajian stood behind me and patted me on the shoulder. I couldn't tell whether he was encouraging me or cutting me down.

"I — can't you see there's no room for mine?" I replied. Although these words came out, my mouth felt as dry as leather, I was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. What had bothered me? Envy? Yes, but not entirely. A hurt to my pride? Yes, but not just that either. Oh, what use is it to think of that. Anyway, I wanted to draw too, to produce a picture just as good as Lei Xiaoyi's.

I was eating my heart out the whole day for this. Why was Lei Xiaoyi able to produce such a good picture? Was it because he was brilliant? But I wasn't stupid either! Had he found some special theme? I had been there too! Ah, it could be that an experienced painter was teaching him and giving him some pointers. Right! That could be it!

The next afternoon when school was let out, I waited for him and left by the school gates with him. On the way, I asked him: "Xiaoyi, we're good buddies, right?"

"Yes!" Xiaoyi was so startled by my question that his eyes opened wide.

"Then, you can do me a big favour. Okay?"

"What do you want me to do? Come on, tell me!"

"I want to take lessons from the old master who's teaching you. Can you ask for me?"

Xiaoyi let out a deep breath. "Oh, that," he said. "I thought it was going to be something difficult! That's easy to arrange. I'll talk to Uncle Zhou. I'm sure he'll agree. He's always pleased to help youngsters! Practically every Sunday, his house is full of young people.



However, to learn from him, you must be prepared to work hard. 'Three days on and two days off' won't do. Can you do it?"

"No problem. No doubt about it!" I replied without hesitation.

Inside I was really very happy. Xiaoyi had already told me that Uncle Zhou was an old master and an old revolutionary. During the War of Resistance Against Japan, he taught painting techniques in Yan'an. I thought that with this old painting master as my teacher I, too, would be able to paint well. How I longed for Sunday to come!

Finally, Sunday arrived.

It was just eight o'clock, and I was in my room glancing through a picture book when Xiaoyi burst in, full of merriment.

"Uncle Zhou has agreed!"

I was so happy that I hugged him and jumped up and down three times.

"He wants you to bring a sketch board and pencil. He also wants you to bring some of your previous sketches. He wants us to go to his house now."

"Okay, let's go!"

I grabbed everything and we set off.

By the time we reached Uncle Zhou's house, my heart was pounding. When we entered the courtyard, it pounded even harder.

I was trying to think what to say when Uncle Zhou came out of the room. He took my hand in his. "Xiaoyi has already told me a lot about you," he laughed. "You're good friends, right? He also said that you're very intelligent. . . ."

"He's only kidding! Don't listen to him. I'm really quite stupid!" I blushed with embarrassment.

He laughed again and patted me on the shoulder. "Stupid? Makes no difference! Learning to draw is like learning anything else. As long as you're willing to work hard! No matter how smart someone is, he still has to practise hard!"

His warmth encouraged me. I raised my head and looked at him with respect.

Uncle Zhou was a robust man, but bald, with only a low fringe of grey hair left. He looked over sixty. Not bearded, he looked in

need of a shave nonetheless. His grey-black eyebrows were thick and strong. His spirited eyes stared forth, so that if you just looked at his eyes, you would never guess that he was an old man.

Uncle Zhou took my hand and led us into the room. Its sparse furnishings — there was only a desk, a round table, a pair of rattan chairs and a few stools — made the room seem even larger. The walls, however, were covered with things. Several oil paintings and some in the Chinese style hung there, and it was only from the walls that you could tell this was the room of a painter.

Uncle Zhou unrolled my drawings and carefully looked them over. "Not bad," he said. "You've started to grasp some of the fundamentals. But you're sloppy and not very conscientious! Take a look! How come this boy's hair opens to the left? Also this peasant ploughing doesn't look right. The handle of the plough is too straight. It's more like a shovel handle. It shows that you've never handled a plough. . . ."

He paused for a while, then continued: "Also, there are still some shortcomings in your basic skills. You should learn these aspects from Xiaoyi."

"Right, yes, I'll definitely pay attention to this." Although I agreed, I was not at all happy. Xiaoyi painted better than I which I conceded. But for me to learn from him! He was only a shade better than I.

Uncle Zhou examined the three pictures I had brought and told me what he thought about each one. He covered everything from the subject selection to the composition. Every stroke and line was judged. Later on he spoke about how art should serve the workers, peasants and soldiers, how to plunge into life, and observe its minutest details. . . . I was a bit overwhelmed by it all.

At last, he said: "When you come here, it's just the same as if you were at school. You must do your homework carefully and finish it on time. It's not enough just to talk about it and never do anything. That way you'll never learn anything valuable. Today's assignment is to go out to sketch. You and Xiaoyi must each complete three pictures about spring-time scenes. Remember, the pictures may be simple but

they must be realistic. And it must have the breath of spring. I know this isn't so easy! But if it's too simple, how will you be able to bring out your skill? After you finish, we'll analyse them together."

Then he opened the door and carried a pot of yellow jasmine out to the sunny courtyard. "Spring is already here," he went on. "There are lots of things to paint. On you go now, and good luck!"

We picked up our sketch pads and left his home. Three scenes of spring, I thought to myself. What was so difficult about that? I could think of several themes right away: a young girl in her spring clothes, an apricot branch in full blossom in her hand, a scene of running through the green meadows; another, a pair of little birds alighting on a sprouting willow branch and breaking into song. . . . I don't like to boast but when it comes to drawing pictures of this kind Xiaoyi is no more clever or skilful than I am.

When we came out onto the street, my eyes immediately focused on a willow tree by the side of the road. I ran over to get a better look. My heart skipped a beat. The branches of the tree were still bare. There wasn't a single leaf on the poplars either, and the people walking on the streets were still wrapped up in their winter clothes. Over there, there was a young girl, but she was wearing so much that she looked like a cotton boll. There were no apricot blossoms in her hands; her hands, in fact, were hidden inside a pair of fur mittens. Spring? It was still the middle of winter! Suddenly I paused in the cold realization.

"Hey! Xiaoyi!" I shouted. "Where are we going to go to draw spring scene? The trees are still bare and the grass hasn't turned green yet. Look! That tap over there is still wrapped up against freezing! Where are we going to go to find spring?"

Xiaoyi was taking it all in his stride. "You haven't looked conscientiously," he said slowly and reasonably. "Why all the panic? Uncle Zhou said that we should try to observe life in its details. So, let's look around!"

I took a couple of deep breaths but didn't say anything. We might as well look for a while!

As we walked, I got more and more dispirited. At first, I really was looking for a likely theme. But later, I gave up altogether in despair.

Xiaoyi dragged me along and soon we reached Xizhimen Gate. When I saw the gate tower, my spirits rose again. I remembered that every year we always went through this gate on our spring outing. And once we passed through it, we were surrounded by scenes of spring.

For a change, it was I who was dragging Xiaoyi. We hurried out the gate. But once we got outside of the city, we saw that the trees were the same — bare and depressing. Even the ice in the moat had not melted completely. The cold wind blowing into our faces made it seem even colder than in the city.

Ah! The weather seemed to be deliberately trying to cause me trouble. Why was spring so late this year?

I lost all hope. I slowed down and stopped. I grabbed Xiaoyi and said: "Let's forget it. Look, it's just the same outside of the city. Let's wait until next week. . . ."

"Next week? No! This assignment must be completed today!"

"Then let's go home and find some painting albums for reference. . . ."

"What? Sit at home and copy someone else's works? What a coward! Have you forgotten what Uncle Zhou demanded?"

I was speechless, and a little embarrassed. But at the same time I couldn't help thinking: "He doesn't know when he's beaten!"

"Let's go to the Purple Bamboo Park," he suggested. "It's good — there're mounds, water and trees, there are also fields and factories nearby. There must be a lot to draw."

I wasn't exactly thrilled by this idea, but since I had nothing better to offer I went along with his suggestion. We might as well try our luck.

The buses to the suburbs on Sundays were especially crowded, so we decided to walk. Now, the northwest wind wasn't quite as chilling and biting as it was during the dead of winter, but since we were walking into the wind, our faces got really raw. My legs were getting

sore, and the picket fence of the park wasn't even in sight yet!

"Let's forget it. We should. . ."

Xiaoyi gave me a look and said: "What, have forgotten your pledge? You said: 'Yes, no problem!'"

"But, I never thought that learning to paint with Uncle Zhou would require me to train not only my hands but my legs as well!"

"I told you quite clearly — to study with Uncle Zhou you have to work long and hard! Your legs are sore and your face is frozen a little. That's nothing but a minor inconvenience."

I had nothing to say. I had no other choice except to follow him.

"When Uncle Zhou was young," he continued, "he walked over more than half of China. During the anti-Japanese war he followed the Eighth Route Army in many a battle so that he could spread anti-Japanese propaganda among the people with his paintings. Last autumn, he went with some of us young people to the Great Wall to sketch. When it came to climbing the mountains, we couldn't keep up with him!"

Xiaoyi's enthusiasm and his determined pace very quickly made me forget the soreness in my legs. Finally we arrived at the Purple Bamboo Park.

When we entered it and looked around, I felt as if I had been drenched with a bucket of cold water: the entire lake was covered with ice. At least there had been one or two spots on the moat outside the city gate that had melted. On the mounds, the trees were still stark naked.

I pulled Xiaoyi round and said: "Let's forget it. About face!"

"Don't be in such a hurry. Take a careful look. Let's walk around!"

He pulled me forward with him. Anyhow, it took us such a long time to get here we might as well have a look. So I accompanied him as he looked around. Xiaoyi, in contrast to me, was in high spirits. He ran here and there. Now up the hill, then down to the lake's edge, sometimes examining the willow branches, then smelling the branches of the peach tree. . . .

Around and around we walked. We reached the south bank of the lake and stopped on the hillside. Suddenly he started in surprise. He grabbed me and pulled me down the hill. We reached the edge of the lake.

Along the lake shore were about twenty upturned rowing-boats. Two old workers were squatting there, painting the bottoms of the boats sky-blue.

We ran over together and Xiaoyi squatted down beside one of the old workers. "Grandpa, let me help you. Okay?"

The worker raised his head and laughed lightly. "Thanks anyway," he replied. "This work isn't so heavy. You go and play!"

"Grandpa, I can do it. Really, you'll be satisfied with my work. Let me do it for a while. You have a rest. Okay?"

"Alright. You look a good boy. Here, you paint for a while. I'll have a rest and a smoke."

Xiaoyi took the brush and paint and set to work; stroke after stroke, he really looked like a professional.

While he was painting, he asked: "Grandpa, how many years have you been a painter?"

He let out a puff of smoke and laughed. "Oh, I'm not a painter. Our work is to take care of the park's rowing-boats. We decided to do the job ourselves, and not bother about getting someone else to paint — well, it saves the state some money! After the boats get a new coat of paint, they'll look quite pretty so that everyone will be very happy when they row. . . ."

I broke in and asked: "The ice on the lake hasn't even melted. Why are you in such a rush to do this?"

"In a rush? Not at all! If we started any later it would be too late. The ice on the lake will disappear very soon. This weather, once it gets warm, it will really heat up. After all it's spring!"

"It's spring!" Xiaoyi elatedly repeated his words.

The old worker smiled. "Yes. It is spring! In another two weeks, these boats will all be in the water. We're really busy just now preparing them. The boats all have to be examined, and the ones that need repairing must be repaired. Just to paint more than twenty boats

once is no easy job! Now that spring is just around the corner, being a little busy only makes us happy."

He tapped the ashes out of his pipe, then put it in his pocket. He took the paint-brush from Xiaoyi and said: "Let me take over. This type of squatting work is hard for you. Go and play. Okay?"

Xiaoyi did not go and play. He quickly took up his sketch pad and called to me: "Tang Chong! Start painting! What a fantastic spring theme!"

Once he put it like that, I suddenly awoke from my daze. I also hurriedly picked up my pencils.

A picture soon appeared on Xiaoyi's sheet: along the edge of the lake a line of rowing-boats, and two workers squatting by their sides with paint cans and brushes in their hands, carefully giving the boats a new spring coat. . . .

"Xiaoyi, you really have the knack! Now we've got this one, at least." I glanced at his picture, and praised it in my heart.

"There are still two more to go. Don't get too happy yet!"

When I had finished my picture, he suggested that we should go and look around the nearby fields. So we walked into the commune's fields.

We strolled around. At times he bent over and grabbed a handful of earth to have a careful look. Black earth everywhere, and unfortunately, nothing had as yet sprouted. The trees were not yet in bud. It was even worse than the Purple Bamboo Park! The more I walked the more annoyed I became. I also became more and more tired. At long last, I stopped Xiaoyi and said: "No point in wandering around aimlessly, my master artist. What is there to paint in a field of dry earth?"

Xiaoyi was still full of pep. "Don't worry," he said. "Let's walk over there. Spring always comes early to the countryside. Take a look over there. . . ."

Several large carts were approaching from the distance. He quickly pulled me forward. As we got closer we could see more clearly. Each one of the carts had a wickerwork siding.

Xiaoyi called out to one of the cart-drivers: "Uncle, what are you doing?"

"We're sending manure to the fields!"

I was puzzled. "But you haven't planted anything. Why are you delivering manure to the fields?" I asked.

"Ha, foolish boy!" The driver laughed. "If we waited until it was time to plant, wouldn't it be too late? If you want to get a better harvest, you must apply sufficient manure. Hard work — enriched soil — good crop, that's how it goes, you know. I've been at this job ever since the commune was set up. Each year we deliver more manure, and each year earlier than the last."

He raised his whip and the animals quickened their pace. Xiaoyi immediately sat down to one side and began to draw: the driver with his whip in the air, the string of carts delivering manure to the boundless fields. . . .

I painted a similar scene. Thank heavens, at least we had managed to get two pictures done.

Xiaoyi finished his work. "What a great assignment we got today! Spring has already come. It is just that we don't know. . . ."

I sat on the ground to have a rest. My legs felt even worse. My stomach started to rumble, so empty that I felt I could eat a horse. . . .

"Let's go," I suggested. "It must be time to go home!"

"No! Still one more to go!" He really put me down. He slung his sketch board over his back and prepared to walk forward.

I saw that he was being stubborn so I started to plead with him: "There's only one left! Let's go home first! Then we can get something done easily, I'm sure."

"It won't do! Even when we try our hardest we still don't do it well enough. If we go about it so casually, what'll be the result? Don't be so lazy! Let's go and have a look in the village. The air of spring must be even thicker there!"

He pointed out the direction and, sure enough, there was a village in front. It was about a kilometre or more away. I raised my leg. It was sore and heavy. I was too exhausted to go any further.

"Why do we have to go to that village?"







"There, there are commune members, homes! Wherever there are labouring people, there will be something to paint!"

I knew that with such a stubborn person just talking would do no good. I wasn't going to argue with him any longer. I might as well drag him back. So I grabbed his arm.

"This is a waste of time! It's no use! Listen to me, Okay? Direction — southeast. Objective — Xizhimen Gate, forward!"

"You go your own way then. But it's not the way forward. It's retreating!" Xiaoyi broke loose from my grip. He lost his temper and began to yell.

That made me get angry too. "If you don't go, I'll go myself! Anyhow, I'm not going to that village!"

When he saw how mad I was, he placed his hand on my shoulder and said calmly: "Let's go. There's bound to be something in the village we can draw. A village scene, won't that be great? . . ."

"I don't care! I'm not going!" I was still angry.

"Then how will you complete three pictures?"

"I could get them done even if I stayed in bed!"

"Stop boasting! Drawing in your bedroom, I've never heard the like of it before."

"Why do we have to draw live subjects?"

"Because Uncle Zhou demands it! He says that unless we do a lot of these we won't be able to. . . ."

I thought to myself that I better stop this bickering. Otherwise there would be no end to it. Finally I turned to go. I figured that if I did it this way, he would relent a little. I knew that he always valued friendship.

"Tang Chong! Tang Chong!" Xiaoyi cried out excitedly. But he did not come after me.

I continued on my way.

"Tang Chong! Tang Chong!" His voice began to fade.

I was sure that by now he would have raced up. So I didn't even pause.

"Tang Chong! . . ." His voice grew fainter.

I began to slow down but even then he did not race up. I slowly came to a halt.

I turned around. All I could see was his back, his sketch board. He was marching firmly towards the village.

A gentle gust of wind blew. His red scarf fluttered in the wind. I don't know why, but I suddenly felt that in this gentle spring breeze, his all-too-familiar image slowly loomed larger and larger in the flood of sunlight.

It was then that I began to understand why his progress was faster than mine, why when we went together to visit old railway workers, only he managed to produce a picture. When I thought of this, I awoke as if from a dream. I seized my pencil and started to draw: a young boy, sketch board on his back, welcoming the spring and striding forward over the broad fields.

This was the first image of spring that I had found myself. What a moving scene!

I had barely enough time to draw a rough sketch before Xiaoyi disappeared in the distance. I closed my pad and hurried after him.

# The Carver

*Zhao Pei*

## I

The bell for the end of school was almost drowned in the driving wind and rain.

I was feeling fed up because I had no umbrella when a voice came from behind me: "Zhang Yongyong! Share my umbrella!"

I looked round. It was Lu Tongbao — the very boy I wanted to see. There was something I had to talk over with him.

"Hey! Quick!" I called out to him eagerly.

He was famous throughout the school as "the sculptor". Among the fifty odd desks in the classroom, his was the easiest to pick out — the one with animals, birds and flowers cut on the top. His masterpieces could also be seen on the doors and window frames of the classrooms, the pillars along the corridors and even on the partitions in the lavatories. He had been in Class B of the first year, junior high, before joining us in Class A when the numbers were evened up. The Young Pioneer Committee of our class had discussed how to help him mend his ways and picked on me to talk to him. I had to tell him to watch where he used his knife. Now as we were going the same way, I came straight to the point.

"Lu Tongbao, I've got something important to tell you."

"What?" I sounded so serious that he stopped.

"It's like this. You're too fond of carving. It's wrong. Nobody else does it. Why do you have to? Come on, swear to give it up!" I stamped my foot to show my determination.

He drew in a long breath. His round little nose puckered up and he said slowly, "You may not like it, but I do."

"You do, do you?" I have a quick temper, and I'd lost it. "If you do it again, we won't be friends any more."

His arm fell from my shoulder. "You may not be my friend, but I'll be yours," he said, dragging out the words and turning down the corners of his mouth.

Ignoring the rolls of thunder, he thrust the handle of his umbrella into my hand and disappeared into the misty rain.

I was stunned. The rain dripped down my neck from the edge of the umbrella.

## II

I was angry and embarrassed when I told the others what had happened. "He doesn't pay any notice to what I say," I concluded. "The only way to stop him carving everywhere is to confiscate his knife."

Loud protests followed. It was infuriating: nobody agreed with me.

The Young Pioneers' instructor listened closely to our discussion. As we couldn't come to agreement, the instructor broke in. She began to analyse Lu Tongbao from different angles. It was strange that she should know everything about him, even the trivial details of his home. She said that his schoolwork was not bad and that he liked working with his hands. His main fault was his habit of carving all over the place. His carving ought to be taken seriously and put to good use. A basketball player wouldn't be banned for good simply for breaking a rule. She urged us to think of a way of turning his interest to good account.

I didn't know what to think. Instead of criticizing Lu Tongbao she wanted to encourage him. I angrily turned away to look at the apricot blossom in the school yard. But as all the others were discussing how to help him correct his bad habit, I felt ashamed of myself

and gave the matter some serious thought. After a while, I hit upon an idea.

"I've got it!" I jumped up. "Lu Tongbao likes carving, so let's ask him to carve seals for us. The teachers have asked us to put seals with our names on our exercise books. What about organizing a group to do the job, with Lu Tongbao in charge?"

Everybody agreed.

### III

Lu Tongbao was excited. The thought of being in charge of the group put a bounce into his walk.

The first few seals were a failure. But with a few day's practice he was as good as a professional. In about two weeks, the group had made a seal for each one of the forty-nine students in our class as well as all the teachers in the school.

We were all pleased at Lu Tongbao's progress.

But one Monday morning something happened. A picture of trees, bridges and boats appeared cut in a brand-new desk in our classroom. It was a beautiful picture, to tell the truth. But the desk was now useless.

Who had done it? There were a lot of guesses.

"It could only have been the sculptor," said one boy. "When I came to school for the rehearsal yesterday I saw him sitting carving all day! I told him off, but he just ignored me."

I was horrified and felt thoroughly uncomfortable. I had failed to keep a close enough eye on him. I couldn't bring myself to go to the morning preparation class, but stared out of the window. If he turned up, I was going to beat him up. He usually arrived at school early. But the bell had gone and there was still no sign of him. I began to wonder what was happening.

The sun moved from the classroom to the plane trees outside the window. The seat next to mine was still empty. What could have happened?

After the third period, I hurried to find the instructor.

She heard me out patiently. "It's my fault," she said after a little while, knitting her brows thoughtfully. I only realized he liked carving but didn't pay enough attention to what he liked carving."

Fanning herself with a book, she sat down and said, "Yongyong, have you any suggestions about how we could reform him?"

I was completely disappointed with him. "Suggestion? What's the use? He's hopeless."

She chuckled. "Have you read that book about the brave soldier Dong Cunrui?" she asked. "Don't you remember how Dong Cunrui became a hero? He made all sorts of mistakes when he first joined the revolution. He needed the help of his comrades before he became so fine a soldier. A lump of pig iron can't be turned into steel just by hitting it once with a hammer. We've got forty-two Young Pioneers in our class, and they'll all be the next generation of communism. But you don't make progress at the same speed, do you? Some are quicker, some are slower, and some go astray. We must have the patience to keep on trying to help them. Do you happen to know why Lu Tongbao was absent today? Could he be ill?"

"Not likely. He's tough enough. Always comes out the first in shot-put."

"Has he played truant before?"

"No."

"Is he ever absent from class because he's done something wrong?"

"No. He comes to class as though everything is quite all right."

"Yes. So why wasn't he here today?" She gazed at a miniature porcelain deer which she took up from the table. "If he didn't realize that it was wrong to carve the desk he'd be sitting in class just as though everything were quite all right. But he didn't. Why? Because he has a sense of shame now. We'll have to find a better way of developing his interest in sculpture."

She picked up a copy of *People's Daily* from the wooden







bookshelf. "Look!" she said, handing the paper over to me. "Can you find any ideas here?"

As I turned over the page doubtfully, my eyes were caught by a picture with sharply contrasted blacks and whites of a boy of my age, his chin cupped in his hands, staring up at the vast sky. Beneath the title "Imagination" was the word "Woodcut" in smaller print. I got her point. "Woodcuts!"

She laughed. She hurried outside and returned with a new book and a painted wooden box from her bicycle basket. The book was called *How to Do Woodcuts* and the box contained six shining woodcut knives.

A warm feeling swept over me. I was too moved to speak. No wonder she was covered in sweat: she'd gone into town to buy them. "Yongyong," she said, patting me on the shoulder as her look turned back to me from the tender green of the campus. "Let's go and see him after school."

I was only too glad to say "yes", for I was just thinking I ought to go and help him with the lessons he'd missed.

## IV

After Lu Tongbao got the woodcut knives, there were no more complaints against him for damaging public property. He had been the most mischievous kid in the class. During break he would catch insects and stuff them down one boy's collar or stealthily put an ink bottle on a chair as another boy was sitting down. But now he was quiet and well-behaved. He would be bending his head and cutting away with his knife at a mirror-smooth board of Chinese catalpa. At times he was seen holding the knife in mid-air and grumbling to himself with a frown, "This damn thing beats me!"

Thursday afternoons after class were given over to interest groups. As a member of the astronomy group I was making a tele-

scope on the lawn when Lu Tongbao came up to me with a spring in his step.

"Look! I've finished my first cut. Tell me what you think about it," he said in a happy yet half-hurt tone as he showed me a printed woodcut in his hand.

I had no particular interest in art, but I examined the picture with great attention. What was that black, round smudge? A tractor? It looked more like a bird's nest, for it was hung high from the branch of a tree. What were those blurred images in the background? Were they meant to be a village? My kid sister could do better with her crayons. The two vertical lines looked like human beings, but why were they merged with trees?

"It's terrible, really terrible." I shook my head vigorously. Only then did I look up and see to my surprise the strained look on his ink-blotted face. For a little while, he was silent. Then he suddenly grabbed the picture from me, tore it to shreds and shot off like an arrow.

Crestfallen, I asked myself, "What have I done?"

A week later, Lu Tongbao did another woodcut. This time, he didn't come to me but asked other classmates what they thought of it. I felt very bad. The instructor was right: you had to help other people very pleasantly. How ever was I going to control my bluntness.

I went up to him, and my voice sounded awkward. "Pal, I'd really like to have a look at your woodcut. This time I know I'll make some serious suggestions."

He handed me the picture after a moment's hesitation.

I studied it for a while. Then, raising it up, I started talking like a teacher, throwing around terms like "perspective", "the cutting method", "the printing technique", and so on. I noticed that Lu Tongbao was smiling from ear to ear, nodding his head at the same time.

Some of his works were carried in our wall newspaper, and the instructor chose two of them to be exhibited in the city's Children's Centre.

## V

As the weather got warmer the school campus started looking much better: broad leaves were opening on the plane trees and poplars and the slender alpine rushes were bursting into bud.

One day, Lu Tongbao showed me a coloured woodcut he had printed. I blinked. I couldn't believe it was his work: neat rows of school buildings under a blue sky, a shady boulevard dotted with small groups of students with satchels on their back. . . . Wasn't this a splendid picture of our school? I didn't know he could do so well. Two of his fingers were bandaged and there were two sticking plasters on the back of his hand.

Our classmates thronged round to see the picture. One of them reached out to grab it. The next moment, it was torn in half. Lu Tongbao almost burst into tears. "That cost me a lot of trouble," he grumbled, his mouth pouted.

"So, you know what trouble means, do you?" one boy put in. "Didn't people have to go to a lot of trouble to make the doors, windows, desks and chairs?"

I was furious with the boy for shooting his mouth off and bringing up the past and sure that Lu Tongbao would lose his temper. But strangely enough, he blushed and looked embarrassed as he had never done before. Fingering the torn halves of the picture he sat head-bowed and deep in thought at his desk.

I hurried into the teachers' office to fetch some paste with which to patch up the picture.

## VI

For days on end, strange things kept happening in our classroom: a chair with a broken leg was mended with a splint; the loose frame of the blackboard was nailed together and the paneless windows were filled with cardboard. Everybody wondered who had done all this.

When I got home one evening I found that I had left my pen at

school and hurried back. As I was crossing the yard, I heard hammering from the classroom. Tiptoeing to the window, I could just make out in the dim light a silhouette working hard to repair a desk. When his face happened to turn towards me I saw Lu Tongbao's round little nose and dishevelled hair.

The instructor's words echoed in my ears: all the forty-two Young Pioneers in our class will be the next generation of communism.

# The Chirruping Grasshopper

*Hao Ran*

Erwang was eating breakfast when suddenly he heard a long-horned grasshopper chirruping outside.

"Guo-guo-guo," how merrily it sang!

He cocked his head to listen carefully. The more he listened the more he was attracted to it, and finally he put down his rice bowl and started for the door.

"Come Erwang," said his father. "Finish your meal before you leave."

"Put on your shirt before you go out," added his mother.

Erwang heard neither his father nor his mother. He skipped out of the door, like a lamb that had been locked in the fold all night.

But where was the grasshopper?

Erwang searched up and down the trellis holding up the gourd vines. But it wasn't there. Then he bent over the fence all covered with climbing beans. Still no grasshopper. He stopped, listened carefully again for a while, then bounded out of the gate in the direction of the chirruping. He looked up and, sure enough, that's where it was.

The house opposite was where Guigui lived. Outside the doorway stood a small locust tree. On it hung an insect cage made of sorghum stalks. Inside was a big-bellied grasshopper, dark green and chirruping gaily.

Just as Erwang was reaching for the cage, Guigui, who was sitting in the doorway, shouted, "Stop, it's mine!" Erwang quickly drew back his hand. He went up to Guigui, smiled and said, "Let's both play with it."

"No," declared Guigui.

"Then can I play with it for just a little while?" Erwang pleaded.

"No, not for a second," Guigui said. "It's all your brother's fault. The other day we were catching grasshoppers in the bean field, and not interfering with him one bit. But he saw us and said we'd trampled the beans. And he told the team leader on us. If not for him we'd have caught some more. Your brother likes to stick his nose into things that aren't any of his business."

Erwang didn't like to hear people say bad things about his brother. He wanted to speak up for him. But he was afraid that if he did Guigui wouldn't even let him look at the fat grasshopper. So he didn't open his mouth. Instead, he just hovered over the cage. Erwang really yearned for that insect. If only he could have one in a cage for himself!

Last year he did have a grasshopper, brought from the bean field by his father. It was a really fine one, with a big belly and long legs. It had a mouth like a pair of pincers, big wings that glistened in the sun like glass, and a grand pair of whiskers. "Guo-guo-guo" — its song rang so loud it used to make his ears tingle. It chirruped day and night, but especially when it was in the sun. Erwang's father made a cage for it, shaped like the belly of a big crab. But unfortunately, when winter came, the grasshopper died. Erwang wept. And he had never had another since, much as he wanted to.

Thinking of all this, Erwang kept his eyes fixed on the fine grasshopper. His hands stretched out again involuntarily for the cage.

Guigui rushed over angrily and pushed him aside. "Go away!" he cried. "I won't let you play with it, so there!"

Erwang lost his balance and plumped down on the ground.

Just then someone called from over the low wall: "Stop fighting! Stop it right now!"

It was Dawang, Erwang's elder brother. He was in the third year of primary school and had received his red scarf as a Little Red Guard. He was shouting as he ran up, a pitchfork on his shoulder and a sickle in his hand. Jumping over the wall as easily as a goat, he put down his farm tools, helped Erwang to his feet and beat the



dust from his clothes. Then he asked Erwang if he was hurt, and what the fuss was about.

"I just wanted a look at the grasshopper, and he pushed me," Erwang wailed.

"I wouldn't have pushed you if you hadn't touched my cage," Guigui came back at him.

"You're bigger than Erwang, Guigui," Dawang said. "You shouldn't have pushed him like that. Suppose you'd hurt him."

"I wouldn't care," retorted Guigui. "Why did you tell the team leader on us?"

"You trampled the brigade's beans, and then you blame me for telling on you?"

"Nosey! Managing everything. You're not a cadre anyway."

"Every commune member can have a say in managing things."

"Well, you can't manage me! I'll go after grasshoppers there again. What can you do about it?" Guigui challenged.

"Like to see you try!" Dawang fumed. "If teacher didn't say we mustn't hit people, I'd slap your face!"

Braver because his brother was there, Erwang clenched his fist and threatened to hit Guigui. But Dawang stopped him.

"No fighting," he said. "Good kids don't fight each other." Then, picking up his sickle and pitchfork, he led Erwang away.

But as they went off, Erwang could not help looking back at the grasshopper in its cage. And, when they got back home, he kept nagging at his father to catch one for him.

"I've no time for your games, son. I've got to go harvesting."

Dawang handed his father the sickle and said: "Dad, your sickle was blunt, so I sharpened it."

Erwang then got after his mother to catch him a grasshopper.

"I'm busy threshing, child, and I've no time to amuse you," she said.

Dawang handed his mother a pitchfork, saying: "Ma, your pitchfork was broken so I fixed it."

Father and Mother were both pleased and praised Dawang for being a boy who understood things.

With their sharpened sickle and repaired pitchfork, they started off to work. But Erwang spread out his arms and blocked the door.

"Be good, let Father and Mother go to work," said Dawang to his little brother.

"I just want a grasshopper," said Erwang.

"I'll catch one for you, a great big one," promised Dawang.

"I want a cage too," Erwang pressed.

"I'll make you one, the best kind."

Only then did Erwang let his father and mother go off to work.

It was a Sunday. Dawang had figured on going harvesting with his father, or threshing with his mother, or to help the carter bring in the beans. But also he was fond of his little brother and wanted to do all he could to make him happy. So he decided that he would first take Erwang out to catch a big-bellied grasshopper and make a cage for it.

The two boys were scarcely out of the gate when they heard a bang. It was the pig pushing its long snout against the door of the sty. Dawang remembered that the pig hadn't eaten yet. Their mother used to come back from the threshing ground during work breaks to feed it. This must be very tiring for her, Dawang thought.

So he said to Erwang, "Come on. Let's help Mama by feeding the pig before we play." With that he took a bucket of swill to the pigsty.

Ergang tagged along, calling out at each step, "Let's go, let's go and catch grasshoppers."

After feeding the pig, they had just come out of the gate when suddenly a button popped off Dawang's shirt. As he bent to pick it up he noticed their cabbage patch was so dry, the earth had begun to crack. Yes, it needed watering. However, Father, who did not want to hamper collective production, had said that morning, "It wouldn't be right to take time out from working for the team to attend to our private plot, so I'll do it after work in the evening." But that would make Father too tired, thought Dawang.

So he said to Erwang, "Let's help Dad by watering the cabbage and then go out to play." He went back into the yard for a small pail

to take to the well for water. Hanging behind his brother, Erwang nagged again, "Let's go, let's go and catch grasshoppers."

After watering the cabbage patch, Dawang wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked around the courtyard. Lots of work still needed to be done — beans to be picked, the yard to be cleaned. But when he saw how upset his little brother was he decided to go with him first.

They headed for the hillside on the north, because Dawang didn't want to go hunting for a grasshopper in the fields and trample the crop.

As they came out of the lane they heard the team leader calling out in the distance, "Hey, a storm is forecast! Everybody out to help with the threshing!"

At this call, even the old folks got out with pitchforks to protect the grain from the coming storm.

Dawang, leading his brother, ran over too.

They found many people already there. Corn-cobs and millet ears stood in neat ricks lined up on either side. Commune members were spreading bean stalks on the ground. Dawang's teacher, Comrade Chen, was also there with the pupils carrying the stalks.

Dawang went up and asked her, "Teacher, what are we spreading those bean stalks for now? Isn't there a storm on the way?"

"Yes, but the forecast says it's three days away," explained Teacher Chen. "We must get the beans hulled today while it's fine, then bring out the other stalks that are still in the fields. Otherwise the beans will sprout under the rain and spoil."

Dawang thought what a big waste it would be of all those fine beans the team had already harvested. "Erwang," he said, "let's give a hand with this work first, then go hunting grasshoppers. Right?"

Erwang, hanging on to Dawang's sleeve, said pouting, "No. You promised you'd get me a big grasshopper. Didn't you mean it?"

Dawang replied, "And you said last night you want to be a good commune member when you grow up. Didn't you mean that?"

"Who didn't mean what?" Erwang asked resentfully.

"If you don't take care of the collective's beans when they're

threatened by rain, you'll never make a good commune member."

Erwang had no answer to this, so he just blinked. Then Dawang asked him to keep the chickens off the ground while he got a pitchfork and started working on a big stack of bean stalks.

The stack was very high. It was quite a job getting the tangled stalks down from the top.

The team leader said someone should go up there. He was starting off to get a ladder when a voice came from overhead: "Team Leader, we don't need a ladder."

Everyone looked up. It was Dawang in the poplar tree.

Seeing that the stack was so high, and the tree so convenient to clamber up, Dawang had put down his pitchfork and climbed the tree.

"I'll throw the stalks down," he said. "You spread them on the ground."

Dawang got out on a branch overhanging the stack. Then he swung from it like a professional athlete and landed smack on top of the stack.

Everyone had a laugh at that, the team leader passed up a pitchfork, Dawang began throwing down the stalks. It was not long before the huge stack was gone and the threshing ground was covered with the bean stalks. When Dawang had time to look for his little brother again, it was almost noon.

Dawang shouted out his name, but no answer came. Erwang was nowhere near the threshing floor.

Dawang went home. But there was nobody there either. Then he went to the team office and the stock farm. But still no Erwang. Dawang was so worried, the sweat ran down his face.

He ran outside the village to look for his little brother.

The sun was like a ball of fire overhead, and the people were having their noon break. Sorghum and bean stalks lay drying in the fields.

Dawang was really disturbed. Little Erwang must be very upset and crying somewhere, he thought. And soon he did hear a sound like someone crying, and a voice that was like Erwang's. But when he





came up, he was surprised to find Erwang laughing and not crying at all.

"There he is! Let him go wherever he can!" Dawang shouted joyfully.

"Erwang was racing over the fields, jumping all over the piles of bean stalks, chasing after grasshoppers. After Dawang had started to work, he had shouted for him a while. He watched the chickens by the threshing floor to pass the time. Then he got tired of that and called to his brother again. But Dawang was so busy he didn't even hear. Finally Erwang became thirsty and started for home to get a drink, passing Guigui's place on the way. Guigui's grasshopper was chirruping, but it had been taken inside where Erwang could not catch sight of it.

Guigui had caught his grasshopper in a bean field, Erwang remembered. At this thought, he forgot all about being thirsty and dashed off to the bean field.

The sound of grasshoppers shrilling came from all over the field. But they were all in hiding and not a one could Erwang see. Wherever he went they would suddenly fall silent. As soon as he was gone they would start up again. Wherever the chirruping was, there Erwang would turn over the bean stalks, pile after pile, but never a grasshopper did he find. He was still at it, very excited, throwing himself onto the heaps of bean stalk piles and combing through each.

Dawang's joy at finding his lost brother changed to anger when he saw what Erwang was doing. Dashing up he yelled, "Who told you to come here?"

Erwang was startled by this sudden shout from behind. "Look, Brother! Grasshoppers . . ." he stammered, beaming.

"Don't talk rubbish!" Dawang planted his hands on his hips and roared. "Look at the beans you've trampled and thrown around. You . . . you . . ."

"I'm catching grasshoppers," Erwang said, still puzzled. "I'm not doing anything to the beans."

The crumpled bean stalks crackled as Dawang turned them over. Pointing at the beans on the ground, he snapped, "Look here! Haven't

you trampled the beans? What a bad boy you are!"

Erwang looked down. Sure enough there were a lot of beans under the stalks. His brother's face was red as fire, eyes glaring with rage.

Erwang burst into tears.

Usually, when Erwang began to cry, Dawang's heart would soften. But today he was too furious to console him. He was thinking what he ought to do. Should he go back and report on what had happened? Finally he decided that, before going back to the village, he must pick up the scattered beans.

But what could he put them in? He had no basket or bag. So he took off his shirt and tied up the sleeves with straw. Moving the stalks carefully he began picking up the beans and putting them into his shirt sleeves.

After finishing several rows he looked for his little brother. There he was, bent over a heap of stalks and picking up beans too!

Erwang had not understood at first why Dawang had bawled him out. Indeed, he had felt it was most unfair. But when he saw his big brother picking up the beans so carefully under the blazing sun, he realized what he had done wrong. This made him stop crying and fell ashamed. No use crying any more, he thought. Better do what Dawang is doing and put things right again. So he started picking the beans up too. He had no basket or bag, and wasn't even wearing a shirt. Should he take off his pants? But he was due to go to school next year and thought he was too big to run around with a bare behind. So he took off his little shoes, and started putting the beans in them.

When Dawang came up and saw the beans in those shoes, all his anger melted. He felt sorry he had flared up at Erwang who was so small, and was a good kid after all. If he had done wrong he should be helped. Flying into a temper was no use.

Coming close to his brother, Dawang said: "That's a good boy! It wasn't easy for the commune members to grow those beans. We can't ruin them just because we want to play."

Erwang went on quickly picking up the beans, without a word. Pretty soon Dawang spoke again, "Erwang, go and rest a while under



that shady tree over there. Let me do it."

"No, I'll do it with you."

Dawang tore a leaf off a castor-bean plant at the edge of the field. He put it on Erwang's head to protect him from the fierce sun. The two little brothers went on their task. They went back to lunch only after they had gathered up the beans.

Who knows how, but the story soon got round the whole village. When it reached the ears of the team's accountant he at once wrote a verse praising the boys. It was put up on the blackboard. When the boys came out of the team office they saw it there.

Dawang could read. After one look he blushed and ran off. But Erwang didn't know what was up, and he asked the accountant to tell him. At first he blushed too, but then felt pleased and went home full of himself.

After lunch Father and Mother returned to work. Dawang went off somewhere too. From the threshold, Erwang again caught sight of Guigui's cage hanging on the locust tree. "Guo-guo-guo!" What a wonderful chirrup that grasshopper had!

Erwang itched to get hold of it, but he turned away quickly with his hands over his ears and ran to the threshing ground. "If I can't find Dawang," he thought, "I'll help the others there."

But the noon break wasn't over and nobody was there yet. So Erwang found himself a small basket, and got to work picking up the beans scattered around the edges of the threshing ground. Pretty soon he had the basket full. Wouldn't it be great to show the beans to his brother before handing them in, and get some praise from him?

Erwang ran home with the basket of beans. At the threshold he stopped short. "Guo-guo-guo!" A grasshopper was singing — inside! Hanging on their gourd trellis was a newly-made insect cage with a big-bellied grasshopper in it!

Dawang sat by the doorway bandaging his finger which he had cut while making the cage for Erwang.

Now Erwang understood. He ran up and hugged his brother.

"Guo-guo-guo."

How wonderfully that big-bellied grasshopper could sing!

# Young Masters of the Mountain Forest

*Wang Zhuyu*

## I

Last autumn, the newspaper gave me an assignment: I was to go to the northern wilderness and interview the brave souls developing the frontier area. When my work with the land reclamation team was concluded, the Party committee at the farm sent me to the Wangda mountains to visit a young lumberjack team. They said that the team had increased production every season, had received red flag awards every year, and as a result, was well known far and wide. I was so excited about my new assignment that I wanted to jump on a plane immediately and meet the lumberjacks and see the majestic forest scenery there.

It was a sunny afternoon. I rode the lumber delivery truck as it bounced speedily towards the mountains. The autumn scenery in frontier areas is breathtaking: the ripened crops; the fresh aroma that wafted on the breeze; the verdant mountain forest which reflected brilliant purples and reds in the sunset. On the side of the road, the late-blooming wild lilacs swayed freely from their stems; alongside the riverlet, dense groves of datetrees were bathed in a delicious shade of rouge . . . seeing all this was like looking at a huge colourful painting.

After the truck stopped at the station I hurriedly jumped off and ran towards the Youth Lumberjack Team. As I was running, I suddenly heard a crystal clear voice singing:

We are the successors of communism,

We will carry on the glorious tradition of our revolutionary

forbears,  
We love our country, we love our people,  
Our bright red scarves wave before us.

I went closer and found a boy wearing a red scarf, carrying on his shoulders a pair of water buckets. He looked about 13 years old, rather clumsy, full of energy, with a pair of large eyes staring out from his round, red face; he seemed honest and quick-witted. As soon as he noticed me, he gave me an enthusiastic greeting. "Sir, are you the man who's coming to visit the young lumber team?"

I replied, "Yes. Are you from that team?"

He shook his head and said, "No. I'm a student at the agricultural school. We're on fall vacation now, so my father had me come and take part in labour. . . ."

As we spoke we moved towards the team office. Everyone had just got off work. Some were gathering up their tools, while others were washing their hands and faces in the stream; the girls had long ago forgotten their fatigue and were chatting and laughing together; and a few restless lads were banging their chopsticks against their bowls to urge the canteen to open; this wild and barren land was suddenly filled with noise and colour.

My young friend took me into the team office and said to someone in a faded army uniform: "Captain, sir. A guest has arrived!" The commander was sitting on a wooden bench smoking a cigarette; his head was lowered and his eyebrows were knit, as if he had something very bothersome on his mind. When he raised his head and our eyes met, we both gave a start: why, we knew each other. We had met during one of the meetings on the farm to exchange experiences in developing production. He then took my hand enthusiastically and said: "Oh, it's you. Welcome, welcome!"

As the team leader and I spoke, the young friend carried in some food. "Why don't you have something to eat? When you've finished eating, tell me stories. I'm going to gather hedgehog and mushrooms tomorrow to give you a treat. . . ." He sped before completing the sentence. His innocent expression amused the captain and me.

"What's the name of our young friend?" I asked.

"He's called Lin Xiaoyong. He's the son of the head of the farm. Whenever school's on vacation, he comes to work either with the land reclamation team or the lumberjack team. The kid's quite capable, he has guts and brains. He'll be the first young master of the great northern wilderness and he's bound to be a winner when he grows up. . . ."

After we ate, I noticed that the captain still had furrowed brows, like a pupil trying to figure out the answer to a difficult question. Then I talked him into taking a walk with me. Once outside, I immediately felt taken in by the surroundings of this lumber team. Everything seemed fresh and beautiful. The clean white tents, the exquisite flowers in the forest, the stones paving the roads between the mountains, the ball courts decorated with flowers; also, the shelters and tools here were almost all made of wood — a wooden canteen, wooden water buckets, ladles, basins and rice bowls were all made of wood. Some people even wrote letters on soft birch bark . . . all this gave everyone the sense that this indeed was timberland country, a world of wood.

I was feeling elated by all this. I couldn't help but notice, though, that the team leader was staring blankly off into the distance, seemingly spellbound by the chimney smoke that drifted through the mountain villages. He knit his thick eyebrows and didn't say a word. I had to ask him: "Is there something on your mind?"

The leader smiled wryly. "We only have enough food for tomorrow. It seems that it'll all be over then."

I continued hastily, "Well, I hear that the farm always gets food up to the mountains in time. Why not this time?"

"The farm received a very urgent assignment yesterday. They can't get food to us in the next two or three days." As he spoke, the team leader took out a letter and handed it to me. I hurriedly opened it up and read the following: "... last night, the land reclamation bureau assigned our farm an urgent and immediate task. They want all our people, machines, and animal power to help the production team of a nearby commune harvest crops today. (According to me-

teorological reports, there will be heavy rains within the next two days.) Therefore the bureau has decided to postpone the delivery of food to the mountains for three days. If you need food before then, you will have to send your own people down the mountain to get it. . . ."

After reading the letter, I looked at the team leader, smiling. "So what are you so worried about? Just send some people down the mountain to fetch the food."

The leader shook his head. "We're rushing to finish an important job now. Our superiors have instructed us to remit our lumber earlier for use. We're extremely pressed for time. Every second counts. How can we send someone to get food at this critical moment? Yet if we don't send someone, what are we going to do about feeding our people! . . ."

After hearing the leader's words, I also started to feel uneasy. Just then, there came a voice of a child from behind: "I'll go down the mountain to fetch food!" We turned around to look. It was Xiaoyong.

The team leader shook his head. "No, you can't. You're too young. It's not safe for you to go in the middle of the night." When Xiaoyong heard this, he pouted and didn't say a word.

Xiaoyong's words alerted me into hastily offering: "Sir, I'll go down. I'm familiar with the farm. I promise to get the food here in time!" Seeing that the leader was still hesitating I said resolutely: "This is an urgent task. Let me do it."

The leader continued: "We're about ninety *li* from the farm. You're not too familiar with the area. It'll be night time too. I'm afraid you'll lose your way."

Xiaoyong then spoke up loudly: "I know the way by heart. I'll show him how to go. Sir, this should be OK, shouldn't it?" The leader looked at his determined and anxious face, thought for a while, and then said smilingly: "Alright, but you must listen to uncle, first of all don't misbehave, and secondly, don't let him get lost."

"OK. OK. OK." Xiaoyong jumped up and down with joy. Then he ran into the tent and came out with two shiny wooden sticks. He

handed me one and said we would bring them to fight wolves.

By the time we bid farewell to the leader and merrily made our way up the road, it was already dark.

## II

Xiaoyong and I, one in front of the other, wound our way through the mountain valleys. The forests on either side made rustling sounds in the wind as if singing for us a cheerful song; the moon disappeared and reappeared through the clouds as if playing hide-and-seek. Even from a distance, the barren fields reflected the light of tractors and the roads resounded with the noise of car motors. Autumn nights on our motherland's frontiers are so beautiful, so precious!

Xiaoyong seemed particularly happy. Hanging a flashlight from his waist, and carrying a wooden pole across his shoulders, he seemed like a powerful little soldier. He sang as he walked. Our footsteps sounded rhythmically on the cobblestone streets covered with fallen leaves, almost as if it was beating out the rhythm of Xiaoyong's song. The more he sang, the more lively he became. I asked him: "What did you do in the lumber team?"

"I . . . I did logistical work."

"What kind of logistical work?"

He answered rather earnestly: "The other men chopped lumber and I served them water. The leader said that this was logistical work."

I thought to myself, no wonder that evening when I first saw him, he was carrying a pair of water buckets. Then I asked: "Our going to the mountain to fetch food now — what kind of work is this considered?"

"Of course it's still logistical work. My father said that he used to do logistical work too, sending food and supplies to the front lines. . . ."

I hurriedly agreed: "Right, right. Right now the lumber team is the front. We must get the food up the mountains in time."

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After we had gone quite a distance, I became afraid that Xiaoyong would be tired so I stopped and called him over for a rest.

The night shadows in the forest were really beautiful. The navy-blue sky seemed like a shiny piece of granite; the crystal stars seemed like a million pearls set in the air. The white clouds drifted in the air, the shadows of trees flickered below, all around insects chirped, and the indistinct mountain flowers and wild berries emitted a sweet fragrance; it was like a picture of an evening landscape.

I asked Xiaoyong if he was tired. "No," he answered. Then he took the flashlight and walked over to the flowering bushes at the side of the road to catch crickets. Seeing how happy he looked, I then asked, "Xiaoyong, do you think life in the mountains is fun?"

"Of course it's fun. I love climbing mountains most. The higher the mountain the better."

"How many times have you been to this mountain?"

"Many times! In the spring, I come here with Father to plant trees; in the winter, I come here with other men to kill wolves. . . ." Having brought to mind all this, Xiaoyong became excited and lost interest in catching crickets. He ran over and said in a mysterious tone: "This Wangda mountain is the best. There are so many good stories to go with it too. Father said that during the resistance period, guerrilla warfare took place right in these mountains, killing the Japanese. . . . Sir, do you know the general Yang Jingyu? The troops he led lived in these mountains. They say he's a real sharp shooter. He always gets it right on the nose. One shot per enemy. Really great. . . ."

I chimed right in, "Really great. Really great. Hey, Xiaoyong. You seem to know so many war stories. Why don't you hurry up and tell me some!" However, now that I asked him he became reluctant to speak!

He lifted his head and looked around. The mountains were becoming enveloped in darkness. It was deep into the night and the lumberjack team would be sound asleep. But I felt alert and not the least bit sleepy.

Suddenly, a cold wind blew in, and the moon and stars became completely masked by dark clouds. Xiaoyong said to me, "Sir, we had better go quickly. It could mean trouble if it started to rain." When I saw the weather was going to change, I quickly got up and continued down the road. From the boundless woods and endless gorges came the rustling sound of pines, distant yet seemingly near, weak yet seemingly strong. The sound was quite intriguing, unfathomable: now like a sweet, melodious tune of a young girl; now like a thousand tides stirred up from the great sea, bringing with it the whistling of fast wind and powerful rain. Xiaoyong was happy to hear this sound. "How beautiful! Do you know what this is called? It's called the 'chorus of the mountains'. Someone from the hunting team told me so."

We kept walking. Lightning and thunder filled the sky and a fierce wind roared along with them. It looked as if a thunderstorm was imminent. Xiaoyong and I hastened our steps, and we pressed forward.

### III

When it was light again outside, Xiaoyong and I rushed to the farm. We were drenched from several bouts of rain, and had slipped several times so our whole bodies were covered with mud and our clothes were soaked through. Not only did Xiaoyong not complain, but he even gave me encouragement! He took my hand and said: "Uncle, don't worry about falling. Be a little brave, learn from Uncle Lei Feng. . . ." His words made me laugh heartily. Now that we were at the farm, he was more zealous than ever.

In the morning light, I studied his flushed face, brimming with energy. The added enthusiasm made him even more attractive; his red scarf, soaked in the rain, seemed even more pleasing to the eye. He held his head up high and took long strides as he pulled me closer to the office of the farm.

Xiaoyong seemed to know exactly where he was going. He



walked to the entrance of the office and burst in ahead without waiting. There was only one person in the room and it looked as if he had just got out of bed. He was drowsily tidying up the room. He watched Xiaoyong charge in and called out in a surprised voice: "Well, well, Xiaoyong's come from the mountains? How did you get mud all over your body? . . ."

"The lumber team doesn't have anything to eat. I've come with uncle to get food." When Xiaoyong was finished speaking, he pointed at me and I rushed over, introduced myself and explained the situation in the mountains.

"My, you must have had a hard time! Lin, the head of the farm, had me prepare the food already."

"Did Lin also go to the commune to help with the rush harvesting of crops?"

"Except for me and the custodian of the warehouse, everyone here has gone."

"Comrade, you are? . . ."

"I am the secretary of the farm. I was sent here not too long ago, so I don't think we have ever met."

He looked at our worried expressions and offered consolation. "There's still time. Have some food and a rest first. I'll have the custodian prepare you a horse and cart to bring the food back up. I think you can leave before it gets dark. Xiaoyong, why don't you hurry home and get some sleep."

After breakfast, the secretary took us to the living room for a rest. We had gone down the mountain in the middle of the night through the rain, but because I was with Xiaoyong, we talked and laughed and didn't feel at all tired. Now, lying on the brick bed, I suddenly felt sore all over. Before long, I was fast asleep.

I don't know how much time went by, but hasty footsteps suddenly aroused me from my dreams. I opened my eyes and found Xiaoyong running into the room panting. He grabbed hold of me with one arm. "Uncle, hurry and get up! We can't carry the food. . . ."

I climbed out of bed and asked dumbly: "What's the matter? What's happened?"

"Last night, the heavy rains poured down the mountain and caused the two bridges to collapse. We can't get through by cart. . . ."

My heart skipped a beat. My chest was pounded with anxiety. "Who told you?"

"I went to the office and heard the man on the phone." After Xiaoyong spoke, he stared straight at me as if pressing me to come up with a solution.

I ran to the office. When the secretary saw me he said: "Damn it. The bridges have collapsed . . . even the postmen can't get through to deliver mail. I was just on the phone with another unit and they said it couldn't be fixed until tomorrow at the earliest."

I became very worried when I heard his words. "Tomorrow? That's no good. The lumber team will have gone hungry then!"

The secretary also expressed anxiety and he rubbed his hands together as he spoke: "Yes, yes. . . . A message like this is really terribly disturbing . . . comrade, you go and rest. I'll go find the custodian and we'll do our best to find a solution to getting food up the mountain in time. . . ."

I walked with heavy steps out of the door. Xiaoyong followed behind, hanging his head low and pouting. He didn't say a word. I thought back to the concerned voice of the secretary when we first came down the hill, his expectant expression, the busy silhouettes of the comrades, their magnificent energy. I suddenly felt as if my heart was made of lead. I felt very unsettled, confused.

Without realizing it, I had walked to the edge of a river behind the farm. The river water was muddy, testifying to the recent mountain storms. There was a school of ducks swimming in the river flapping their wings and quacking loudly. A young girl was poking a long thin bamboo stick in the wild grass.

I walked down to the river, dipped into the water, and splashed some river water over my warm face. Several ducks swam to the edge of the river, and Xiaoyong started throwing rocks in the water, scaring the ducks off, who swam away flapping their wings, Xiaoyong seemed totally entranced by the ducks, and stared at them for a long time before looking away. Suddenly, it was as if he had discovered

something, and his face was completely bright again. He kept saying over and over: "Oh, I've thought of a solution. There's a way." He pulled my hand as he spoke and we raced back to the office.

In the office, Xiaoyong gazed at the secretary and the custodian. He said loudly: "How about if we transfer the food up the river to the mountains?"

"Up the river?" I asked in a strained voice.

"Exactly. The river behind the farm goes all the way to the mountain where the lumber team is. One time, father took me up the mountain right alongside the river."

"Then what will you use to transport the food?"

"A boat. No, no, I mean we'll use lumber as a raft. Last autumn, when I followed my teacher to visit a fishing team, I saw them use raft to transport things."

When the old custodian finished listening to Xiaoyong's words, he squeezed him with his hand and said excitedly: "Xiaoyong! What a clever lad! Terrific! Let's just do that!"

The secretary was so happy he clapped his hands and laughed out loud. He said to me, "We were worrying all this time that we couldn't get the food to the team. Who would have ever guessed that the little kid would come up with such a brilliant idea! Don't mind his age. He's still able to grasp big matters. Wonderful, wonderful!"

I nodded my head in agreement. I had long ago spotted the cleverness in Xiaoyong's eyes. In my heart I felt an indescribable joy.

The custodian extended his large palms and said, "If the raft is mine to take charge of, I promise to have it ready before dark. I guarantee the food will arrive in the mountains before tonight. I'll take the rudder of the raft. All we have to do is find some people to tow the line!"

"OK." The secretary said: "Let's do it that way. Since all the people at the farm have gone to the production brigade of the commune, it's impossible to find anyone else, it'll be up to me and the newspaperman to pull."

Xiaoyong hurriedly interjected: "There are people. There are

people. I'll go and find some strong Young Pioneers. We'll help Uncle pull!" With that, he ran off.

Before long, from the riverbank behind the farm came the sound of axes sawing away, and children chatting and laughing. It was Xiaoyong and the Young Pioneers he had mobilized helping the old custodian work on the raft. They busied themselves with everything, their hands and feet never stopping to rest. They were excellent young helpers. From distance their red scarves waving in the wind in the sunlight were like a vigorous flame burning, a brilliant stretch of red that dazzled the eyes.

## IV

When the sun had almost gone down behind the hills, the raft was ready. To the sound of laughter, it was finally pushed out to the river. Xiaoyong and his cohorts jumped up and down with joy, as if performing the ritual of boat builders putting a 10,000-ton ship in the water for the first time.

After dinner, the families of the workers and the teachers at the nursery schools rushed over to help us load the food; some carried rice, others flour; the custodian more or less orchestrated the operation and we worked busily until two wooden chests were filled. Then Xiaoyong brought seven or eight Young Pioneers in a line. With heads held high and arms swinging at their sides in perfect alignment, they were valiant and vigorous, like a battalion of mighty Eighth Route soldiers marching off to the battlefield. I was just about to go over and greet them when suddenly I heard Xiaoyong's command: "Attention!" The soldiers stopped short. Xiaoyong ran up to the custodian, saluted and called out: "Reporting, sir. The food transportation troops of the Young Pioneers have arrived."

The custodian laughed until his whole face was wrinkles. He purposely imitated Xiaoyong's tone and replied jokingly: "Soldiers dismissed. Wait for further orders." We couldn't stop laughing.

The secretary walked ahead holding Xiaoyong's hand, saying:

"Xiaoyong, you Young Pioneers have done a wonderful job. The farm will definitely notify your schools and encourage other students to follow your example. Because I'm very busy, I can't get away, so I won't be able to go with you. Be careful on the road. Listen to the other men."

Xiaoyong nodded his head. "Yes, sir."

After all the appropriate preparations were made it was already dark.

The custodian stood on the raft and called out, "All aboard!"

"Anchors away! I'll take the rudder, Xiaoyong, you navigate up front, everyone else, tow the line. Heave-ho!"

And so, this tiny team of food transporters, in the boundless darkness of the night, forged ahead through the rocky gorges: one step deep water, another shallow; rocks covered the ground and water weeds twined itself around our ankles. We pulled the long rope and forged against the current with the raft dragging behind us.

After a while, the custodian called from the raft: "Are you tired, men?"

"No!" The Young Pioneers cried back in unison.

Xiaoyong stopped in his tracks, turned around and shouted: "Sir, are you tired?"

The custodian laughed heartily: "I'm sitting in the 'boat', my feet aren't touching the ground, I haven't walked a step. Why should I be tired!"

We continued like this, telling jokes all the way. At some point, it's hard to say when, the moon hung in the sky and the silvery glow spread across the earth. The outline of the chain of mountains and villages had already become distinct; the reflection of the stars in the sky and the trees along the riverside all shimmered in the water. I looked at my watch and saw it was already midnight. I said to the custodian: "It's midnight. Let's rest a while."

The custodian lifted his head and looked at the moonlight, saying as he laughed, "Yes, it is already the middle of the night. I guess that people who have had eaten forget about those who haven't, and riders forget about pedestrians. Sitting on the 'boat', I didn't realize

that you pulling it might be tired. Let's have a rest!"

We sat in a line, along the river embankment. The custodian remarked: "You must be exhausted. Xiaoyong, after we arrive in the mountains, you must let your troops have a good rest. . . ."

The child answered quickly: "I'm not at all tired. It's not half as tiring as climbing mountains for fun. Really."

Then I suggested: "Why don't you sing a song!"

"Let Xiaoyong conduct."

"Great!" Xiaoyong very abruptly got up like a young conductor. Standing in front of his band, he started them off on a song, lifting both hands and calling out: "Ready! . . . Sing!" Then, there in the dark river valley, they sang the song,

We are the successors of communism,

We will carry on the glorious tradition of our revolutionary  
forbears,

.....

The happy sound of the children's song and the rustling of the night breeze through the flowing water bounced splendidly off the barren lands.

When we got back on the road, I felt my steps getting heavy. But the Young Pioneers were still as before, each one full of energy, brimming with enthusiasm. Their cheerful mood was contagious, and I immediately felt added strength. I thought to myself, here we were in the remote northern frontier lands, and the frontlines of labour are maturing adolescents. How capable they are!

We were still forging ahead when suddenly Xiaoyong cried out from the front: "Darn, we can't go through!"

We immediately stopped in our tracks. The custodian suddenly turned the rudder and the raft veered towards the bank. "What's the matter, Xiaoyong?" He asked several times.

"There is a stone dam blocking the way ahead. The raft can't get across."

The custodian went over and lit the area with his flashlight. There was in fact a not-too-high stone dam lying across the river, and

the water was flowing over the top. It would hit the wheel, then roll up, over, and down. It looked as if unless we removed the middle section, there would be no way for the raft to pass through. The custodian pondered for a while and said: "This was a dam constructed by fishermen. Who would have thought that it would block our way tonight." He raised his head and eyed the troop of Young Pioneers. "What do you think we should do?"

Xiaoyong heaved his chest and said: "Let's take it down then!" "Right, take it down," the children cried in unison.

The custodian nodded his head and pointed: "The water isn't deep. Let's all work together to get it down; we can't let these few rocks make our comrades go hungry!"

Xiaoyong rolled up his trouser legs and said: "We say we're going to do it, so let's do it!" With that, he jumped into the water first, and said to the custodian: "Let's form teams. We'll pass down the small rocks and then throw them aside. As for the larger rocks, we'll have to carry them away. . . ."

When he heard this, the custodian was full of praise. "Good lad, you really know how to figure things out. OK!"

We jumped into the water one after the other, spaced ourselves out in a line and passed the stones one by one to the bank. Although the water wasn't deep, it was now autumn, and especially on this northern frontier, it was already quite cold. Also, it was just before dawn, so the water's chill struck right to the bone, like countless sharp needles pricking our bodies. Yet not one of these "red scarves" uttered a syllable about cold or fatigue, but grit their teeth, summoned all their strength and swiftly and energetically passed the stones from hand to hand, keeping their morale up with jokes and laughter. What was even more moving was that they carried out this arduous labour as if it were their normal, daily work. Looking at their toiling bodies, I felt a flood of warmth rush into my breast. Even if the weather were much colder, being together with children like these our hearts would be blazing hot!

Before long, we had breached a gap more than three metres wide in the stone embankment. The raft could get through!

Yelling victory cries the children scrambled onto the bank. "Take the rudder, granddad," said Xiaoyong. "Let's get the 'boat' moving!"

"You should run around and jump up and down first to warm up," the custodian said.

"We're not cold."

"It doesn't matter. Jump!" said the custodian, smiling.

The children ran around and jumped up and down. Afterwards they shouted, "This time we really aren't cold!"

"Then just now you were only pretending? . . ." Everyone laughed.

I said on a note of praise, "It was lucky for us just now that Xiaoyong's eyes are so good, if he hadn't seen ahead so keenly our 'boat' would have capsized."

"If the 'boat' had capsized," said the children quickly, "granddad would have fallen into the water."

"So what if I'd fallen in. I could have caught a fish for your breakfast," said the custodian humorously. The children broke into laughter again.

The custodian looked up at the moon. "It'll be daybreak soon. Come on — let's get the 'boat' moving!"

By the time we reached the lumber team the first rays of sunlight were entering the tents. The mountain valley was suddenly alive with noise and movement. People bustled joyfully about, laughing and talking. It was a long time before we all calmed down.

The team leader grasped the custodian's hand tightly. "Yesterday we heard that the bridge had collapsed in the flood and that all traffic into the mountains was temporarily halted. We were really worried! But now you've come by 'water transport', what a splendid idea!"

The custodian waved his hand, "The credit for this can't go to me. When we were trying to think of a way out of this emergency last night, the idea of 'water transport' never occurred to us. The fact that you can have your breakfast on time today is thanks to Xiaoyong's bright idea, and to the help of these Young Pioneers. . . ."

When they heard what the custodian said, everyone was so stir-



red they lifted Xiaoyong and his companions into the air and wouldn't release them for ages. Watching these wonderful "red scarves", the young masters of the mountain forests, the team leader was immeasurably happy. "You children really deserve to be called the revolution's good successors, growing up under the red flag. . . . When you grow up, these forests and mountains will pass into your charge, and I believe that you will do even better!"

The custodian smiled and looked contented. He nodded his head, stroking his grey beard. "True! With successors like these, we have no cause for concern."

The sun rose over the horizon. Everyone wore smiling faces, like wild flowers shining with dew, reflecting the rosy glow from the east.

The smoke from the lumber team's morning campfires rose into the air as usual. Along with the sound of talk and laughter and the sighing of the pines, it drifted into the mountain valley and far away. . . .

## Road Sign

*Wang Yuanjian*

— From a song: "Sailing on the sea depends on the helmsman,  
All living things depend on the sun for their  
growth."

The last little rosy cloud drifted a little, then disappeared on the horizon. Night came quietly to the marshland. In an instant, the rolling hills in the distance, the blooming wild flowers and grass all around, the clusters of grass and shrubs, all turned hazy and disappeared from sight. High above, the stars popped out one by one. They were many, bright and distant.

Having watched the night descend, Luo Xiaobao, a fourteen-year-old Red Army messenger, stood in the dark, clutching a stick in one hand and a small, makeshift blackboard in the other. The night weighed heavily on him. "It's dark everywhere. Where do I go?" he thought. He was lost in the marshes.

The blackboard, slightly bigger than a book and made for him as the troops rested at Zunyi by his squad leader, had helped Luo Xiaobao keep his bearings during the day treks through the endless marshes. Every day the squad leader asked Luo to write a few characters on the board to help him learn to read. Luo studied as he walked, trying to trace the characters with one hand that his squad leader had copied and explained to him: "Go north to fight the Japanese." He had studied in this way ever since they left Wujiang River — across the snowy mountains and for six days in the marshland. But with nothing but weeds and wild herbs to eat, trudging along under a hot sun or torrential rains and rough hailstorms. His feet, infected

from walking in muddy water, hurt in their straw sandals. To keep his bearings, he often stuck his blackboard in his squad leader's satchel and kept pace with it. With this guide, and with his company commander in the front and his political commissar bringing up the rear, he didn't need to worry about losing the way.

But a surprise enemy cavalry attack that day had changed Luo's life. His squad leader was badly wounded. Lying on a stretcher, the squad leader looked up at him. "Have you studied today?" the squad leader asked.

"Yes," Luo said, struggling to keep back the tears.

"You understand the meaning — 'Go north to fight the Japanese'?"

Luo looked at the parched lips which, only a few days before, had explained the meaning to him over a lunch of wild herbs.

"Yes," Luo said.

"You must know them well. This is our strategy." The squad leader again explained: "The enemy intended to drive the Red Army to the snowy mountains in the southwest border where we couldn't strike roots and set up a base. . . ." He tried to raise himself on his elbow, struggling for breath. "No. We wouldn't succumb to it. Chairman Mao told us to go north across the marshes to northern Shaanxi. . . ."

Luo finished the sentence for him, ". . . And carry out the task of resistance against the Japanese."

"Right." The squad leader lay back and smiled. "You must keep on learning. . . . Remember what you've learned while you learn new words. . . ." He lost consciousness before he could finish.

Luo cried out and clutched the squad leader's arm. There was no response. Luo ran off a long way to find some water for his squad leader but when he returned, the company had already moved some distance off. At first he walked with the squad which brought up the rear, but gradually he lagged behind until he found himself alone in the dark.

He now realized how important it was to maintain his bearings. "How can I know where to go?" he wondered. "There's no temple, no

big tree . . . nothing to mark the way."

A cool breeze made him shudder. It reminded him that in the daytime, the wind had come from the front, from the left. He put a finger in his mouth, warming it, and then held it up to catch the direction of the wind. He now knew the way to go.

Luo lost all sense of time as he made his way across the patches of solid grass crisscrossed by muddy streams. He felt sleepy and hungry, the wild herbs he had eaten for supper having long since lost their effect. To keep himself going and to avoid falling into the muddy pools, he began reviewing his lessons.

"'Fight against Japan' . . . How do I write the characters? Do I start from the left? . . ."

Suddenly, he saw the light of a bonfire before him. The rising mist from the marsh gave it a red glow, brightening Luo's heart as well as the land. He forgot his hunger, fatigue, sleepiness, and the pain in his feet. He hurried to the site on a high piece of land. The troops seemed to have been camped there for some time. Men lay or sat back to back around the embers of many fires. Some were sound asleep.

Luo picked his way among the sleeping men and stretched out his cold hands to one of the fires. Among the many comrades asleep around the fire, one man, sitting on a bundle of clothes with one elbow on a tin box, studied a map which rested on his knees. He looked up after a while, thought for a moment then made some marks on the map with a red pencil.

"He must be a leading comrade," thought Luo, observing the tall man with the broad forehead and long hair in need of a haircut. He had his muddy trousers rolled up above his wet straw sandals. Most men were sleeping after a whole day of trudging through the muddy water. But this man was working. Luo thought the work must be very important.

Seeing the map inspired Luo to dare to approach the working man with a question. "Report," he said softly.

The man looked up from his map.

Luo saluted smartly and said in his boyish voice, "I've dropped

behind. I'm a messenger of the third company under the Courageous Division."

"The Courageous Division," the man said with a smile. "No wonder you're so brave, catching up with the troops all by yourself."

His lighthearted remark and open manner disarmed Luo who, stepping forward, pointed at the map and asked, "You're a leading comrade. You must know where we're heading tomorrow. Will you...?"

"Sure," he said and gestured to Luo to sit beside him on the tin box. He pointed at a red circle on the map. "Look, we're going north. We'll arrive at Banyu in the afternoon and be out of the marshes."

"Really?" Luo exclaimed.

"That's for tomorrow.... Now..." He took up two writing brushes as chopsticks and stirred their ends in the contents of an enamel bowl. Then he picked up the hot bowl which he placed on the tin box.

"You must eat." He picked up a hot bean with his brushes, cooled it by blowing on it and put it in Luo's hand. "These were sent over by the vanguards of your Courageous Division. Eat them and you'll be even braver."

He handed Luo the brushes. Luo ate the wild herbs and beans while watching the man write rapidly on paper he had pulled out from under a bronze inkwell.

"His work must be extremely important," Luo thought. Remembering his blackboard, he stopped eating and was embarrassed to see he had eaten more than half of the few dozen beans. Smiling sheepishly, he pushed the bowl towards the man.

The man paid no attention. He swallowed a few mouthfuls of the wild herbs and handed the bowl back to Little Luo who shook his head.

"No. I have something to do, too," Luo said. He pushed the bowl away, cleaned his blackboard and placed it before the leading comrade. "I didn't have a lesson today. Teach me something, comrade," Luo said.

"You want to study? Good," the man replied. He picked up a brush, wet its tip on the damp grass beside him and then dipped it in the inkwell. He wrote four big characters on the board: "Advance towards the north." He pointed at each word with his brush and read them aloud. Then he explained the meaning of each character slowly, fully and clearly.

Listening attentively, Luo saw in his mind's eye a large contingent of Red Armymen marching towards the north to the plateau in northern Shaanxi.

"Now that you know the meaning of the characters," the man said, "can you tell me why we advance towards the north?"

"It's closer to the Japanese invading army. The Red Army wants to fight the Japanese."

"What else?"

"And," Luo cocked his head and thought for a while. "Northern Shaanxi is our revolutionary base. The Red Army can rest, reorganize and expand..." The leading comrade nodded his approval. He then pulled out a sheet of paper from under the inkwell. "But someone has sent us this cable suggesting that we go south over the marshes again."

"What?" Luo sat up. "That won't do. That's going backwards." He saw again the desolate snowy mountains in the south and the deserted marshland and the face of his squad leader.

"We can't cross the marshes again. There's no way to set up a revolutionary base south of the marshes. That won't do."

Without thinking the boy raised his voice. "Please tell him Red Armyman Luo Xiaobao doesn't agree — neither would my squad leader." His agitation — it was as if he were talking to the man who made the suggestion — stopped when he looked into the calm face of the leading comrade and heard him saying:

"You're right. There is no way out if we go back." He looked intently at Luo. "So you oppose going south, comrade. Is that right?"

"Certainly. I would tell Chairman Mao himself that this suggestion is wrong." Luo announced with confidence. "I'm sure Chairman Mao would agree with me."







The leading comrade nodded. "You're right."

Luo went on: "This is a matter of strategy, Comrade, you're a leading comrade. You must ask Chairman Mao and the Central Party Committee to oppose this suggestion of going south." He tugged at the man's sleeve. "Please do that."

The leading comrade said nothing, but offered Luo his hand. The man then resumed writing on his tin box.

Luo placed his board in front of him and looked at the four characters carefully, tracing them with his forefinger as he repeated, "Advance towards the north." At the same time, he was aware of the rapid movements of the big hand of the man writing beside him.

Again he thought, "His work must be very important."

Being a Red Army member who had crossed the snowy mountains and the marshes, Luo knew that it was correct to go north along the route charted by Chairman Mao. What he couldn't know was how rough the path of revolution really was and that at that very moment, Chairman Mao and the Party Central Committee were waging a fierce struggle against a plot to split the Party from within. Neither could he know that the characters he was learning had been put by the man sitting beside him into an important document, one that would become part of the modern history of revolution. "Advance towards the north", like the Big Dipper, was pointing out the direction to the Red Army troops who were undergoing a long march for the Party, for revolution.

Meanwhile, Luo read, studied and wrote the characters until he had imprinted them on his mind. These four characters with their meaning as explained by the leading comrade would lead him to a new world. Slowly he grew drowsy. In his imagination the campfire before him turned into a cluster of flowers, like the azaleas in his hometown in northern Shaanxi where he had fought, studied, and grown up. And now he was able to read . . . with these thoughts in mind, he fell asleep.

When Luo woke up, it was dawn. He rose quickly and rubbed his eyes. In the east rosy clouds rose and spread and the morning sun was leaping out from the horizon, lighting up the marshes.

A soldier with a rifle walked up to him with a smile. "Chairman Mao said that I shouldn't wake you up until the troops were ready to leave."

Luo was stunned. "Chairman Mao?"

"Yes. Didn't you spend the evening here with him?" The guard picked up an old sweater which was put over him by Chairman Mao the night before and handed him a handkerchief and a dozen beans. "Chairman Mao wanted you to eat these beans, wrap your feet with this handkerchief and catch up with the troops. The route we're taking is written on your board."

"Where is Chairman Mao?" Luo asked.

"At the front," the guard said, pointing north. "He commands the advance troops."

Luo took the handkerchief and beans and picked up his blackboard. He ran to catch up with the troops.

Columns of the Red Army proceeded north on the Long March, treading out a path through the blooming marshes.

Luo stopped at a tree and looked back at the Red Armymen marching up from behind. He broke off a branch and hung his blackboard on the stub.

"Advance towards the north." Like a road sign, the four words pointed out the direction of the revolution.

With deep feelings Luo looked at his road sign then bent to dress his feet with the handkerchief. He tied up his straw sandals and joined the march.



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